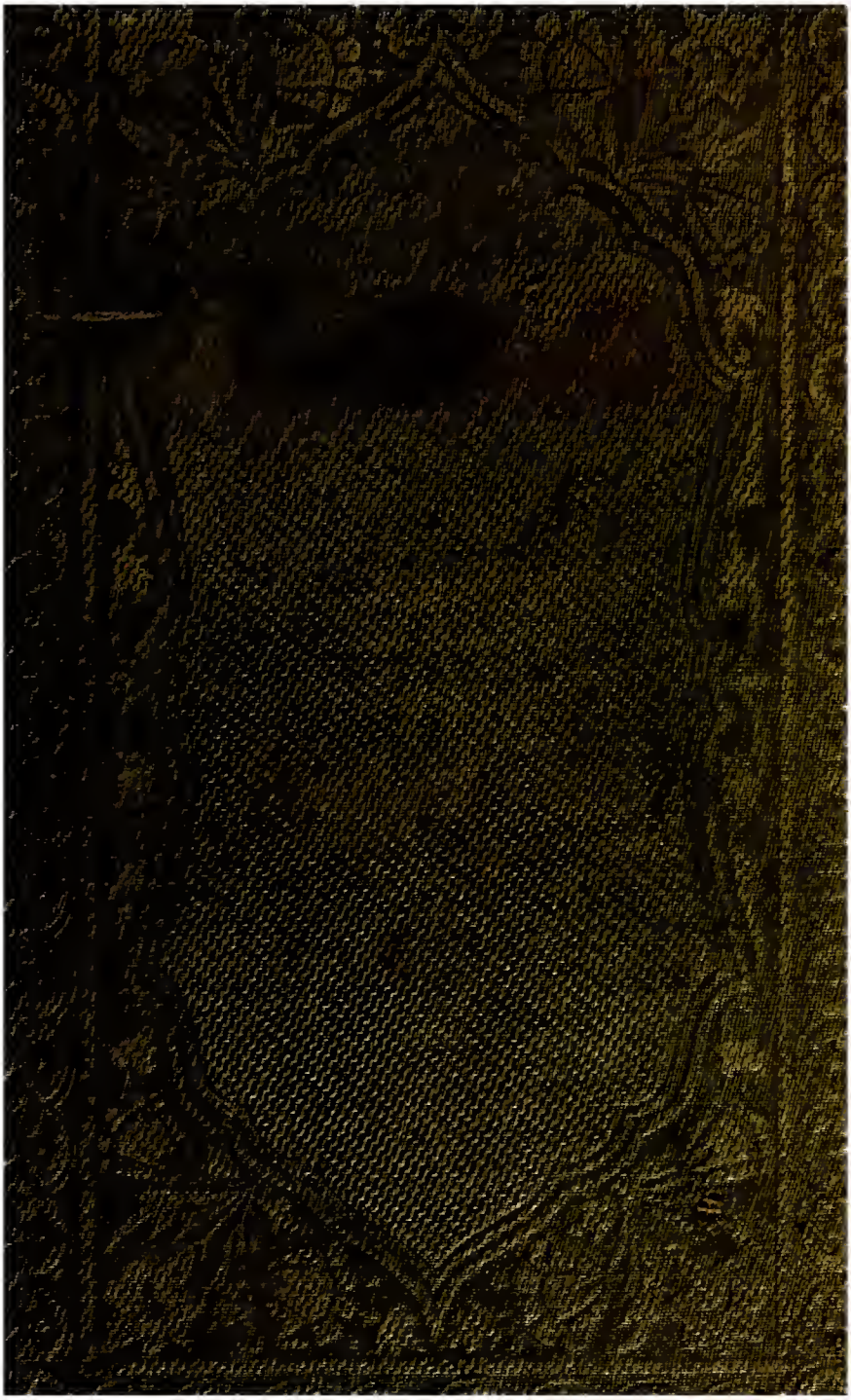

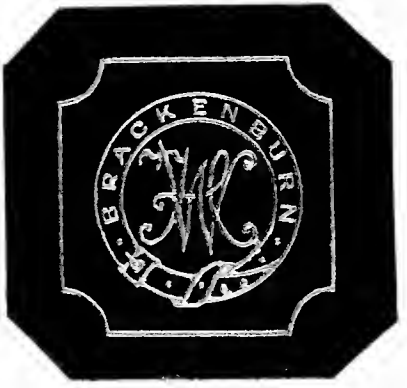
BRACKENBURN

THE QUEEN OF HEARTS.

BY

WILKIE COLLINS,

AUTHOR OF

"THE DEAD SECRET," "AFTER DARK,"

ETC., ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. I.

LONDON:
HURST AND BLACKETT, PUBLISHERS,
SUCCESSORS TO HENRY COLBURN,
13, GREAT MARLBOROUGH STREET.
1859.

The Author reserves the right of Translation.

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LETTER OF DEDICATION.

TO

EMILE FORGUES.

At a time when French readers were altogether unaware of the existence of any books of my writing, a critical examination of my novels appeared under your signature, in the "Revue des Deux Mondes." I read that article, at the time of its appearance, with sincere pleasure and sincere gratitude to the writer; and I have honestly done my best to profit by it ever since.

At a later period, when arrangements were made for the publication of my novels in Paris, you kindly undertook, at some sacrifice of your own convenience, to give the first of the series—*The Dead Secret*—the great advantage of being rendered into French by your pen. Your excellent translation of *The Lighthouse* had already taught me how to appreciate the value of your assistance; and when *The Dead Secret* appeared in its French form, although I was sensibly gratified, I was by no means surprised to find my fortunate work of fiction—not translated, in the mechanical sense of the word—but transformed from a novel that I had written in my language, to a novel that you might have written in yours.

I am now about to ask you to confer one more literary obligation on me, by accepting the dedication of this book; as the earliest acknowledgment which it has been in my

power to make, of the debt I owe to my critic, to my translator, and to my friend.

The Stories which form the principal contents of the following pages, are all, more or less, exercises in that Art which I have now studied anxiously for some years, and which I still hope to cultivate, to better and better purpose, for many more. Allow me, by inscribing the collection to you, to secure one reader for it at the outset of its progress through the world of letters, whose capacity for seeing all a writer's defects may be matched by many other critics, but whose rarer faculty of seeing all a writer's merits is equalled by very few.

WILKIE COLLINS.

LONDON, October, 1859.

THE QUEEN OF HEARTS.

CHAPTER I.

OURSELVES.

We were three quiet, lonely old men, and she was a lively, handsome young woman; and we were at our wit's end what to do with her.

A word about ourselves, first of all—a necessary word to explain the singular situation of our fair young guest.

We are three brothers; and we live in a barbarous, dismal old house called The Glen

Tower. Our place of abode stands in a hilly, lonesome district of South Wales. No such thing as a line of railway runs anywhere near us. No gentleman's seat is within an easy drive of us. We are at an unspeakably inconvenient distance from a town; and the village to which we send for our letters is three miles off.

My eldest brother, Owen, was brought up to the Church. All the prime of his life was passed in a populous London parish. For more years than I now like to reckon up, he worked unremittingly, in defiance of failing health and adverse fortune, amid the multitudinous misery of the London poor; and he would, in all probability, have sacrificed his life to his duty, long before the present time, if The Glen Tower had not come into his possession through two unexpected deaths in the elder and richer branch

of our family. This opening to him of a place of rest and refuge saved his life. No man ever drew breath who better deserved the gifts of fortune—for no man, I sincerely believe, more tender of others, more diffident of himself, more gentle, more generous, and more simple-hearted than Owen, ever walked this earth.

My second brother, Morgan, started in life as a doctor; and learnt all that his profession could teach him, at home and abroad. He realised a moderate independence by his practice; beginning in one of our large northern towns, and ending as a physician in London. But, although he was well known and appreciated among his brethren, he failed to gain that sort of reputation with the public, which elevates a man into the position of a great doctor. The ladies never liked him. In the first

place, he was ugly (Morgan will excuse me for mentioning this); in the second place, he was an inveterate smoker, and he smelt of tobacco when he felt languid pulses in elegant bedrooms; in the third place, he was the most formidably outspoken teller of the truth, as regarded himself, his profession, and his patients, that ever imperilled the social standing of the science of medicine. For these reasons, and for others, which it is not necessary to mention, he never pushed his way, as a doctor, into the front ranks—and he never cared to do so. About a year after Owen came into possession of The Glen Tower, Morgan discovered that he had saved as much money for his old age, as a sensible man could want; that he was tired of the active pursuit—or, as he termed it, of the dignified quackery—of his pro-

fession; and that it was only common charity to give his invalid brother a companion who could physic him for nothing, and so prevent him from getting rid of his money, in the worst of all possible ways, by wasting it on doctors' bills. In a week after Morgan had arrived at these conclusions, he was settled at The Glen Tower; and, from that time, opposite as their characters were, my two elder brothers lived together in their lonely retreat, thoroughly understanding, and, in their very different ways, heartily loving one another.

Many years passed before I, the youngest of the three—christened by the unmelodious name of Griffith—found my way, in my turn, to the dreary old house and the sheltering quiet of the Welsh hills. My career in life had led me away from my

brothers. And even now, when we are all united, I have still ties and interests to connect me with the outer world, which neither Owen nor Morgan possess.

I was brought up to the Bar. After my first year's study of the law, I wearied of it, and strayed aside idly into the brighter and more attractive paths of literature. My occasional occupation with my pen was varied by long travelling excursions in all parts of the Continent; year by year, my circle of gay friends and acquaintances increased, and I bade fair to sink into the condition of a wandering, desultory man, without a fixed purpose in life of any sort, when I was saved by what has saved many another in my situation—an attachment to a good and a sensible woman. By the time I had reached the age of thirty-five, I had done what neither of

my brothers had done before me—I had married.

As a single man, my own small independence, aided by what little additions to it I could pick up with my pen, had been sufficient for my wants. But with marriage and its responsibilities came the necessity for serious exertion. I returned to my neglected studies, and grappled resolutely, this time, with the intricate difficulties of the law. I was called to the Bar. My wife's father aided me with his interest, and I started into practice, without difficulty and without delay.

For the next twenty years my married life was a scene of happiness and prosperity, on which I now look back with a grateful tenderness that no words of mine can express. The memory of my wife is busy at my heart, while I think of those past times. The forgotten tears rise in my eyes

again, and trouble the course of my pen, while it traces these simple lines.

Let me pass rapidly over the one unspeakable misery of my life; let me try to remember now, as I tried to remember then, that she lived to see our only child, our son, who was so good to her, who is still so good to me, grow up to manhood; that her head lay on my bosom when she died; and that the last frail movement of her hand, in this world, was the movement that brought it closer to her boy's lips.

I bore the blow—with God's help I bore it, and bear it still. But it struck me away for ever from my hold on social life; from the purposes and pursuits, the companions and the pleasures of twenty years, which her presence had sanctioned and made dear to me. If my son, George, had desired to follow my profession, I should still have struggled against my-

self, and have kept my place in the world, until I had seen him prosperous and settled. But his choice led him to the army; and before his mother's death he had obtained his commission, and had entered on his path in life. No other responsibility remained to claim from me the sacrifice of myself; my brothers had made my place ready for me by their fireside; my heart yearned, in its desolation, for the friends and companions of the old boyish days; my good, brave son promised that no year should pass, as long as he was in England, without his coming to cheer me; and so it happened that I, in my turn, withdrew from the world, which had once been a bright and a happy world to me, and retired to end my days, peacefully, contentedly, and gratefully, as my brothers are ending theirs, in the solititude of The Glen Tower.

How many years have passed since we have all three been united, it is not necessary to relate. It will be more to the purpose, if I briefly record, that we have never been separated since the day which first saw us assembled together in our hill-side retreat; that we have never yet wearied of the time, of the place, or of ourselves; and that the influence of solitude on our hearts and minds has not altered them for the worse, for it has not embittered us towards our fellow-creatures, and it has not dried up in us the sources from which harmless occupations and innocent pleasures may flow refreshingly to the last, over the waste places of human life. Thus much for our own story, and for the circumstances which have withdrawn us from the world for the rest of our days.

And now imagine us three lonely old men, tall, and lean, and white-headed;

dressed, more from past habit than from present association, in customary suits of solemn black. Brother Owen, yielding, gentle, and affectionate in look, voice, and manner. Brother Morgan, with a quaint surface-sourness of address, and a tone of dry sarcasm in his talk, which single him out, on all occasions, as a character in our little circle. Brother Griffith, forming the link between his two elder companions; capable, at one time, of sympathising with the quiet, thoughtful tone of Owen's conversation, and ready at another to exchange brisk severities on life and manners with Morgan; in short, a pliable, double-sided old lawyer, who stands between the clergyman-brother and the physician-brother, with an ear ready for each, and with a heart open to both, share and share together.

Imagine the strange old building in which we live to be really what its name implies, a tower standing in a glen; in past times the fortress of a fighting Welsh chieftain; in present times, a dreary land-lighthouse, built up in many stories of two rooms each, with a little modern lean-to of cottage form, tacked on quaintly to one of its sides; the great hill, on whose lowest slope it stands, rising precipitously behind it; a dark, swift-flowing stream in the valley below; hills on hills all round, and no way of approach but by one of the loneliest and wildest cross-roads in all South Wales.

Imagine such a place of abode as this, and such inhabitants of it as ourselves; and then, picture the descent among us—as of a goddess dropping from the clouds—of a lively, handsome, fashionable young lady

—a bright, gay, butterfly creature, used to flutter away its existence in the broad sunshine of perpetual gaiety—a child of the new generation, with all the modern ideas whirling together in her pretty head, and all the modern accomplishments at the tips of her delicate fingers. Imagine such a light-hearted daughter of Eve as this, the spoilt darling of society, the charming spendthrift of Nature's choicest treasures of beauty and youth, suddenly flashing into the dim life of three weary old men—suddenly dropped into the place of all others which is least fit for her—suddenly shut out from the world in the lonely quiet of the loneliest home in England. Realise, if it be possible, all that is most whimsical and most anomalous in such a situation as this; and the startling confession contained in the opening sentence of these pages will

no longer excite the faintest emotion of surprise. Who can wonder now, when our bright young goddess really descended on us, that I and my brothers were all three at our wit's end what to do with her!

CHAPTER II.

OUR DILEMMA.

WHO is the young lady? And how did she find her way into The Glen Tower?

Her name (in relation to which I shall have something more to say, a little farther on) is Jessie Yelverton. She is an orphan, and an only child. Her mother died while she was an infant; her father was my dear and valued friend, Major Yelverton.

He lived long enough to celebrate his darling's seventh birthday. When he died he entrusted his authority over her, and his responsibility towards her, to his brother and to me.

When I was summoned to the reading of the Major's will, I knew perfectly well that I should hear myself appointed guardian and executor with his brother; and I had been also made acquainted with my lost friend's wishes as to his daughter's education, and with his intentions as to the disposal of all his property in her favour. My own idea, therefore, was, that the reading of the will would inform me of nothing which I had not known in the testator's lifetime. When the day came for hearing it, however, I found that I had been over hasty in arriving at this conclusion. Towards the end of the document

there was a clause inserted, which took me entirely by surprise.

After providing for the education of Miss Yelverton, under the direction of her guardians, and for her residence, under ordinary circumstances, with the Major's sister, Lady Westwick, the clause concluded by saddling the child's future inheritance with this curious condition :—

From the period of her leaving school to the period of her reaching the age of twenty-one years, Miss Yelverton was to pass not less than six consecutive weeks, out of every year, under the roof of one of her two guardians. During the lives of both of them, it was left to her own choice to say which of the two she would prefer to live with. In all other respects, the condition was imperative. If she forfeited it, excepting, of course, the case of

the deaths of both her guardians, she was only to have a life-interest in the property. If she obeyed it, the money itself was to become her own possession, on the day when she completed her twenty-first year.

This clause in the will, as I have said, took me at first by surprise. I remembered how devotedly Lady Westwick had soothed her sister-in-law's death-bed sufferings, and how tenderly she had afterwards watched over the welfare of the little motherless child;—I remembered the innumerable claims she had established, in this way, on her brother's confidence in her affection for his orphan daughter—and I was, therefore, naturally amazed at the appearance of a condition in his will, which seemed to show a positive distrust of Lady Westwick's undivided influence over the character and conduct of her niece.

A few words from my fellow-guardian, Mr. Richard Yelverton, and a little after-consideration of some of my deceased friend's peculiarities of disposition and feeling, to which I had not hitherto attached sufficient importance, were enough to make me understand the motives by which he had been influenced in providing for the future of his child.

Major Yelverton had raised himself to a position of affluence and eminence from a very humble origin. He was the son of a small farmer, and it was his pride never to forget this circumstance, never to be ashamed of it, and never to allow the prejudices of society to influence his own settled opinions on social questions in general.

Acting, in all that related to his intercourse with the world, on such principles as these, the Major, it is hardly neces-

sary to say, held some strangely heterodox opinions on the modern education of girls, and on the evil influence of society over the characters of women in general. Out of the strength of those opinions, and out of the certainty of his conviction that his sister did not share them, had grown that condition in his will, which removed his daughter from the influence of her aunt for six consecutive weeks in every year. Lady Westwick was the most light-hearted, the most generous, the most impulsive of women; capable, when any serious occasion called it forth, of all that was devoted and self-sacrificing, but, at other and ordinary times, constitutionally restless, frivolous, and eager for perpetual gaiety. Distrusting the sort of life which he knew his daughter would lead under her aunt's roof, and at the same time gratefully remembering his sister's affectionate devo-

tion towards his dying wife and her helpless infant; Major Yelverton had attempted to make a compromise, which, while it allowed Lady Westwick the close domestic intercourse with her niece that she had earned by innumerable kind offices, should, at the same time, place the young girl for a fixed period of every year of her minority under the corrective care of two such quiet old-fashioned guardians as his brother and myself. Such is the history of the clause in the will. My friend little thought, when he dictated it, of the extraordinary result to which it was one day to lead.

For some years, however, events ran on smoothly enough. Little Jessie was sent to an excellent school, with strict instructions to the mistress to make a good girl of her, and not a fashionable young lady. Although she was reported to be anything but a pattern pupil in

respect of attention to her lessons, she became, from the first, the chosen favourite of everyone about her. The very offences which she committed against the discipline of the school were of the sort which provoke a smile even on the stern countenance of authority itself. One of these quaint freaks of mischief may not inappropriately be mentioned here, inasmuch as it gained her the pretty nick-name under which she will be found to appear occasionally in these pages.

On a certain autumn night, shortly after the midsummer vacation, the mistress of the school fancied she saw a light under the door of the bedroom occupied by Jessie and three other girls. It was then close on midnight; and fearing that some case of sudden illness might have happened, she hastened into the room. On opening the door, she discovered, to her horror and amazement, that all four

girls were out of bed—were dressed in brilliantly-fantastic costumes, representing the four grotesque "Queens" of Hearts, Diamonds, Spades, and Clubs, familiar to us all on the pack of cards—and were dancing a quadrille, in which Jessie sustained the character of The Queen of Hearts. The next morning's investigation disclosed that Miss Yelverton had smuggled the dresses into the school; and had amused herself by giving an impromptu fancy ball to her companions, in imitation of an entertainment of the same kind, at which she had figured in a "Court-card" quadrille at her aunt's country house.

The dresses were instantly confiscated, and the necessary punishment promptly administered; but the remembrance of Jessie's extraordinary outrage on bedroom discipline lasted long enough to become one of the traditions of the school; and she and her sister-culprits

were thenceforth hailed as the "Queens" of the four "suits," by their class-companions, whenever the mistress's back was turned. Whatever might have become of the nick-names thus employed, in relation to the other three girls, such a mock title as The Queen of Hearts was too appropriately descriptive of the natural charm of Jessie's character, as well as of the adventure in which she had taken the lead, not to rise naturally to the lips of everyone who knew her. It followed her to her aunt's house—it came to be as habitually and familiarly connected with her, among her friends of all ages, as if it had been formally inscribed on her baptismal register—and it has stolen its way into these pages because it falls from my pen naturally and inevitably, exactly as it often falls from my lips in real life.

When Jessie left school, the first difficulty presented itself—in other words, the necessity

arose of fulfilling the conditions of the will. At that time, I was already settled at The Glen Tower; and her living six weeks in our dismal solitude and our humdrum society, was, as she herself frankly wrote me word, quite out of the question. Fortunately, she had always got on well with her uncle and his family. So she exerted her liberty of choice; and, much to her own relief and to mine also, passed her regular six weeks of probation, year after year, under Mr Richard Yelverton's roof.

During this period, I heard of her regularly; sometimes from my fellow-guardian; sometimes from my son George, who, whenever his military duties allowed him the opportunity, contrived to see her; now at her aunt's house, and now at Mr. Yelverton's. The particulars of her character and conduct, which I gleaned in this way, more than

sufficed to convince me that the poor Major's plan for the careful training of his daughter's disposition, though plausible enough in theory, was little better than a total failure in practice. Miss Jessie, to use the expressive common phrase, took after her aunt. She was as generous, as impulsive, as light-hearted, as fond of change and gaiety and fine clothes—in short, as complete and genuine a woman as Lady Westwick herself. It was impossible to reform the "Queen of Hearts," and equally impossible not to love her. Such, in few words, was my fellow-guardian's report of his experience of our handsome young ward.

So the time passed till the year came of which I am now writing—the ever-memorable year, to England, of the Russian war. It happened that I had heard less than usual at this period, and indeed for many months

before it, of Jessie and her proceedings. My son had been ordered out with his regiment to the Crimea, in 1854, and had other work in hand now than recording the sayings and doings of a young lady. Mr. Richard Yelverton, who had been hitherto used to write to me with tolerable regularity, seemed now, for some reason that I could not conjecture, to have forgotten my existence. Ultimately, I was reminded of my ward by one of George's own letters, in which he asked for news of her; and I wrote at once to Mr. Yelverton. The answer that reached me was written by his wife—he was dangerously ill. The next letter that came informed me of his death. This happened early in the spring of the year 1855.

I am ashamed to confess it, but the change in my own position was the first idea that crossed my mind when I read the news of

Mr. Yelverton's death. I was now left sole guardian; and Jessie Yelverton wanted a year still of coming of age.

By the next day's post I wrote to her about the altered state of the relations between us. She was then on the Continent with her aunt, having gone abroad at the very beginning of the year. Consequently, so far as eighteen hundred and fifty-five was concerned, the condition exacted by the will yet remained to be performed. She had still six weeks to pass—her last six weeks, seeing that she was now twenty years old—under the roof of one of her guardians. And I was now, the only guardian left!

In due course of time I received my answer, written on rose-coloured paper, and expressed throughout in a tone of light, easy, feminine banter, which amused me in spite of myself. Miss Jessie, according

to her own account, was hesitating, on receipt of my letter, between two alternatives—the one, of allowing herself to be buried six weeks in The Glen Tower; the other of breaking the condition, giving up the money, and remaining magnanimously contented with nothing but a life-interest in her father's property. At present she inclined decidedly towards giving up the money, and escaping the clutches of "the three horrid old men;" but she would let me know again, if she happened to change her mind. And so with best love, she would beg to remain, always affectionately mine—as long as she was well out of my reach.

The summer passed; the autumn came—and I never heard from her again. Under ordinary circumstances, this long silence might have made me feel a little uneasy. But news reached me about this time, from the Crimea,

that my son was wounded—not dangerously, thank God, but still severely enough to be laid up — and all my anxieties were now centred in that direction. By the beginning of September, however, I got better accounts of him, and my mind was made easy enough to let me think of Jessie again. Just as I was considering the necessity of writing once more to my refractory ward, a second letter arrived from her. She had returned at last from abroad, had suddenly changed her mind, suddenly grown sick of society, suddenly become enamoured of the pleasures of retirement, and suddenly found out that the three horrid old men were three dear old men, and that six weeks' solitude at The Glen Tower was the luxury of all others that she languished for most. As a necessary result of this altered state of things, she would therefore now propose to spend her allotted six

weeks with her guardian. We might certainly expect her on the twentieth of September; and she would take the greatest care to fit herself for our society, by arriving in the lowest possible spirits, and bringing her own sackcloth and ashes along with her.

The first ordeal to which this alarming letter forced me to submit, was the breaking of the news it contained to my two brothers. The disclosure affected them very differently. Poor dear Owen merely turned pale, lifted his weak thin hands in a panic-stricken manner, and then sat staring at me in speechless and motionless bewilderment. Morgan stood up straight before me, plunged both his hands into his pockets, burst suddenly into the harshest laugh I ever heard from his lips, and told me, with an air of triumph, that it was exactly what he expected.

"What you expected?" I repeated in astonishment.

"Yes," returned Morgan with his bitterest emphasis. "It doesn't surprise me in the least. It's the way things go in this world—it's the regular moral see-saw of good and evil—the old story, with the old end to it. They were too happy in the garden of Eden—down comes the serpent, and turns them out. Solomon was too wise—down comes the Queen of Sheba, and makes a fool of him. We've been too comfortable at The Glen Tower—down comes a woman and sets us all three by the ears together. What are you both staring at? I tell you again, this mess of ours is in the established order of things. All I wonder at is, that it hasn't happened before." With those words, Morgan resignedly put on his hat, and turned to the door.

"You're not going away before she comes!" exclaimed Owen, piteously. "Don't leave us —please don't leave us!"

"Going!" cried Morgan, with great contempt. "What should I gain by that? When destiny has found a man out, and heated his gridiron for him, he has nothing left to do that I know of but to get up and sit on it."

I opened my lips to protest against the implied comparison between a young lady and a hot gridiron, but, before I could speak, Morgan was gone.

"Well," I said to Owen, "we must make the best of it. We must brush up our manners, and set the house tidy, and amuse her as well as we can. The difficulty is where to put her—and when that is settled, the next puzzle will be, what to order in to make her comfortable. It's a hard thing, brother, to

say what will, or what will not, please a young lady's taste."

Owen looked absently at me, in greater bewilderment than ever—opened his eyes in perplexed consideration — repeated to himself slowly the word "tastes"—and then helped me with this suggestion:—

"Hadn't we better begin, Griffith, by getting her a plum-cake?"

"My dear Owen!" I remonstrated, "it is a grown young woman who is coming to see us, not a little girl from school."

"Oh!" said Owen, more confused than before. "Yes—I see; we couldn't do wrong, I suppose—could we?—if we got her a little dog, and a lot of new gowns."

There was, evidently, no more help in the way of advice to be expected from Owen than from Morgan himself. As I came

to that conclusion, I saw through the window our old housekeeper on her way, with her basket, to the kitchen-garden; and left the room to ascertain if she could assist us.

To my great dismay, the housekeeper took even a more gloomy view than Morgan of the approaching event. When I had explained all the circumstances to her, she carefully put down her basket, crossed her arms, and said to me in slow, deliberate, mysterious tones,—

"You want my advice about what's to be done with this young woman? Well, sir, here's my advice:—Don't you trouble your head about her. It won't be no use. Mind, I tell you, it won't be no use!"

"What do you mean?"

"You look at this place, sir,—it's more

like a prison than a house, isn't it? You look at us, as lives in it. We've got (saving your presence) a foot a-piece in our graves, haven't we? When you was young yourself, sir, what would you have done if they had shut you up for six weeks in such a place as this, among your grandfathers and grandmothers with their feet in the grave?"

"I really can't say."

"I can, sir. You'd have run away. *She'll* run away. Don't you worry your head about her—she'll save you the trouble. I tell you again she'll run away."

With those ominous words, the housekeeper took up her basket, sighed heavily, and left me.

I sat down under a tree, quite helpless. Here was the whole responsibility shifted upon my miserable shoulders. Not a lady

in the neighbourhood to whom I could apply for assistance—and the nearest shop eight miles distant from us. The toughest case I ever had to conduct, when I was at the Bar, was plain sailing compared with the difficulty of entertaining our fair guest.

It was absolutely necessary, however, to decide at once where she was to sleep. All the rooms in the tower were of stone, — dark, gloomy, and cold even in the summer-time. Impossible to put her in any one of them. The only other alternative was to lodge her in the little modern lean-to, which I have already described as being tacked on to the side of the old building. It contained three cottage-rooms, and they might be made barely habitable for a young lady. But then those rooms were occupied by Morgan. His books were in one, his bed was in another, his pipes and general

lumber were in the third. Could I expect him, after the sour similitudes he had used in reference to our expected visitor, to turn out of his habitation, and disarrange all his habits, for her convenience? The bare idea of proposing the thing to him seemed ridiculous. And yet, inexorable necessity left me no choice but to make the hopeless experiment. I walked back to the tower hastily and desperately, to face the worst that might happen before my courage cooled altogether.

On crossing the threshold of the hall-door, I was stopped, to my great amazement, by a processson of three of the farm-servants followed by Morgan, all walking after each other in Indian file, towards the the spiral staircase that led to the top of the tower. The first of the servants carried the materials for making a fire; the second

bore an inverted arm-chair on his head; the third tottered under a heavy load of books; while Morgan came last, with his canister of tobacco in his hand, his dressing-gown over his shoulders, and his whole collection of pipes hugged up together in a bundle under his arm.

"What on earth does this mean?" I enquired.

"It means taking Time by the forelock," answered Morgan, looking at me with a smile of sour satisfaction. "I've got the start of your young woman, Griffith; and I'm making the most of it."

"But where, in Heaven's name, are you going?" I asked, as the headman of the procession disappeared with his firing up the staircase.

"How high is this tower?" retorted Morgan.

"Seven stories, to be sure," I replied.

"Very good," said my eccentric brother, setting his foot on the first stair, "I'm going up to the seventh."

"You can't," I shouted.

"*She* can't, you mean," said Morgan, "and that's exactly why I'm going there."

"But the room is not furnished."

"It's out of her reach."

"One of the windows has fallen to pieces."

"It's out of her reach."

"There's a crow's nest in the corner."

"It's out of her reach."

By the time this unanswerable argument had attained its third repetition, Morgan, in his turn, had disappeared up the winding stairs. I knew him too well to attempt any further protest.

Here was my first difficulty smoothed

away most unexpectedly; for here were the rooms in the lean-to placed by their owner's free act and deed at my disposal. I wrote on the spot to the one upholsterer of our distant county town to come immediately and survey the premises; and sent off a mounted messenger with the letter. This done, and the necessary order also despatched to the carpenter and glazier to set them at work on Morgan's sky-parlour in the seventh story, I began to feel, for the first time, as if my scattered wits were coming back to me. By the time the evening had closed in, I had hit on no less than three excellent ideas, all providing for the future comfort and amusement of our fair guest. The first idea was to get her a Welsh pony; the second was to hire a piano from the county town; the third was to send for a boxful of novels from London. I must

confess I thought these projects for pleasing her very happily conceived; and Owen agreed with me. Morgan, as usual, took the opposite view. He said she would yawn over the novels, turn up her nose at the piano, and fracture her skull with the pony. As for the housekeeper, she stuck to her text as stoutly in the evening as she had stuck to it in the morning. "Pianner or no pianner; story-book or no story-book; pony or no pony, you mark my words, sir —that young woman will run away."

Such were the housekeeper's parting words when she wished me good night.

When the next morning came, and brought with it that terrible waking time which sets a man's hopes and projects before him, the great as well as the small, stripped bare of every illusion, it is not to be concealed that I felt less sanguine of our

success in entertaining the coming guest. So far as external preparations were concerned, there seemed, indeed, but little to improve. But, apart from these, what had we to offer in ourselves and our society to attract her? There lay the knotty point of the question, and there the grand difficulty of finding an answer.

I fall into serious reflection, while I am dressing, on the pursuits and occupations with which we three brothers have been accustomed, for years past, to beguile the time. Are they at all likely, in the case of any one of us, to interest or amuse her?

My chief occupation, to begin with the youngest, consists in acting as steward on Owen's property. The routine of my duties has never lost its sober attraction to my tastes, for it has always employed me in watching the best interests of my brother, and

of my son also, who is one day to be his heir. But can I expect our visitor to sympathize with such family concerns as these? Clearly not.

Morgan's pursuit comes next in order of review—a pursuit of a far more ambitious nature than mine. It was always part of my second brother's whimsical, self-contradictory character to view with the profoundest contempt the learned profession by which he gained his livelihood; and he is now occupying the long leisure hours of his old age in composing a voluminous treatise, intended, one of these days, to eject the whole body corporate of doctors from the position which they have usurped in the estimation of their fellow-creatures. This daring work is entitled "An Examination of the Claims of Medicine on the gratitude of Mankind. Decided in the Negative, by a Retired Physician." So far

as I can tell, the book is likely to extend to the dimensions of an Encyclopædia; for it is Morgan's plan to treat his comprehensive subject principally from the historical point of view, and to run down all the doctors of antiquity, one after another, in regular succession from the first of the tribe. When I last heard of his progress, he was hard on the heels of Hippocrates, but had no immediate prospect of tripping up his successor. Is this the sort of occupation, I ask myself, in which a modern young lady is likely to feel the slightest interest? Once again, clearly not.

Owen's favourite employment is, in its way, quite as characteristic as Morgan's; and it has the great additional advantage of appealing to a much larger variety of tastes. My eldest brother—great at drawing and painting when he was a lad, always interested in

artists and their works in after life—has resumed, in his declining years, the holiday occupation of his school-boy days. As an amateur landscape painter, he works with more satisfaction to himself, uses more colour, wears out more brushes, and makes a greater smell of paint in his studio, than any artist by profession, native or foreign, whom I ever met with. In look, in manner, and in disposition, the gentlest of mankind, Owen, by some singular anomaly in his character, which he seems to have caught from Morgan, glories placidly in the wildest and most frightful range of subjects which his art is capable of representing. Immeasurable ruins, in howling wildernesses, with blood-red sunsets gleaming over them; thunder-clouds rent with lightning, hovering over splitting trees on the verges of awful precipices; hurricanes, shipwrecks, waves,

and whirlpools follow each other on his canvas, without an intervening glimpse of quiet everyday nature to relieve the succession of pictorial horrors. When I see him at his easel, so neat and quiet, so unpretending and modest in himself, with such a composed expression on his attentive face, with such a weak white hand to guide such bold big brushes, and when I look at the frightful canvasful of terrors which he is serenely aggravating in fierceness and intensity with every successive touch, I find it difficult to realise the connection between my brother and his work, though I see them before me, not six inches apart. Will this quaint spectacle possess any humorous attractions for Miss Jessie? Perhaps it may. There is some slight chance that Owen's employment will be lucky enough to interest her.

Thus far my morning cogitations advance,

doubtfully enough; but they altogether fail in carrying me beyond the narrow circle of The Glen Tower. I try hard, in our visitor's interests, to look into the resources of the little world around us; and I find my efforts rewarded by the prospect of a total blank.

Is there any presentable living soul in the neighbourhood whom we can invite to meet her? Not one. There are, as I have already said, no country seats near us; and society in the county-town has long since learnt to regard us as three misanthropes, strongly suspected, from our monastic way of life, and our dismal black costume, of being Popish priests in disguise. In other parts of England, the clergyman of the parish might help us out of our difficulty. But here, in South Wales, and in this latter half of the nineteenth century, we have the old type-parson of the days of Fielding still in a state

of perfect preservation. Our local clergyman receives a stipend which is too paltry to bear comparison with the wages of an ordinary mechanic. In dress, manners, and tastes, he is about on a level with the upper class of agricultural labourers. When attempts have been made by well-meaning gentlefolks to recognize the claims of his profession, by asking him to their houses, he has been known, on more than one occasion, to leave his ploughman's pair of shoes in the hall, and to enter the drawing-room respectfully in his stockings. Where he preaches, miles and miles away from us and from the poor cottage in which he lives, if he sees any of the company in the squire's pew yawn, or fidget in their places, he takes it as a hint that they are tired of listening, and closes his sermon instantly at the end of the sentence. Can we ask this most irreverend and unclerical

of men to meet a young lady? I doubt, even if we made the attempt, whether we should succeed, by fair means, in getting him beyond the servants' hall.

Dismissing, therefore, all idea of inviting visitors to entertain our guest; and feeling, at the same time, more than doubtful of her chance of discovering any attraction in the sober society of the inmates of the house, I finish my dressing and go down to breakfast, secretly veering round to the housekeeper's opinion, that Miss Jessie will really bring matters to an abrupt conclusion by running away. I find Morgan as bitterly resigned to his destiny as ever; and Owen so affectionately anxious to make himself of some use, and so lamentably ignorant of how to begin, that I am driven to disembarrass myself of him at the outset by a stratagem.

I suggest to him that our visitor is sure to

be interested in pictures, and that it would be a pretty attention, on his part, to paint her a landscape to hang up in her room. Owen brightens directly, informs me in his softest tones that he is then at work on the Earthquake at Lisbon, and enquires whether I think she would like that subject. I preserve my gravity sufficiently to answer in the affirmative; and my brother retires meekly to his studio, to depict the engulphing of a city, and the destruction of a population. Morgan withdraws, in his turn, to the top of the tower, threatening, when our guest comes, to draw all his meals up to his new residence by means of a basket and string. I am left alone for an hour; and then the upholsterer arrives from the county town.

This worthy man, on being informed of our emergency, sees his way, apparently, to a good stroke of business; and thereupon wins

my lasting gratitude by taking, in opposition to everyone else, a bright and hopeful view of existing circumstances.

"You'll excuse me, sir," he says, confidentially, when I show him the rooms in the lean-to, "but this is a matter of experience. I'm a family man, myself, with grown-up daughters of my own; and the natures of young women are well known to me. Make their rooms comfortable, and you make 'em happy. Surround their lives, sir, with a suitable atmosphere of furniture, and you never hear a word of complaint drop from their lips. Now, with regard to these rooms, for example, sir. You put a neat French bedstead in that corner, with curtains conformable—say, a tasty chintz. You put on that bedstead what I will term a sufficiency of bedding; and you top up with a sweet little eider-down quilt, as light as

roses, and similar the same in colour. You do that, and what follows? You please her eye when she lies down at night, and you please her eye when she gets up in the morning—and you're all right so far, and so is she. I will not dwell, sir, on the toilet-table, nor will I seek to detain you about the glass to show her figure, and the other glass to show her face, because I have the articles in stock, and will be myself answerable for their effect on a lady's mind and person."

He led the way into the next room as he spoke, and arranged its future fittings and decorations, as he had already planned out the bed-room, with the strictest reference to the connexion which experience had shown him to exist between comfortable furniture and female happiness.

Thus far, in my helpless state of mind, the man's confidence had impressed me, in spite

of myself, and I had listened to him in superstitious silence. But as he continued to rise, by regular gradations, from one climax of upholstery to another, warning visions of his bill disclosed themselves in the remote background of the scene of luxury and magnificence which my friend was conjuring up. Certain sharp professional instincts of bygone times resumed their influence over me; I began to start doubts and ask questions; and as a necessary consequence, the interview between us soon assumed something like a practical form.

Having ascertained what the probable expense of furnishing would amount to; and having discovered that the process of transforming the lean-to (allowing for the time required to procure certain articles of rarity from Bristol) would occupy nearly a fortnight, I dismissed the upholsterer, with

the understanding that I should take a day or two for consideration, and let him know the result. It was then the fifth of September, and our Queen of Hearts was to arrive on the twentieth. The work, therefore, if it was begun on the seventh or eighth, would be begun in time.

In making all my calculations with a reference to the twentieth of September, I relied implicitly, it will be observed, on a young lady's punctuality in keeping an appointment which she had herself made. I can only account for such extraordinary simplicity on my part, on the supposition that my wits had become sadly rusted by long seclusion from society. Whether it was referable to this cause or not, my innocent trustfulness was at any rate destined to be practically rebuked before long, in the most surprising manner. Little did I

suspect, when I parted from the upholsterer on the fifth of the month, what the tenth of the month had in store for me.

On the seventh I made up my mind to have the bedroom furnished at once, and to postpone the question of the sitting-room for a few days longer. Having despatched the necessary order to that effect, I next wrote to hire the piano, and to order the box of novels. This done, I congratulated myself on the forward state of the preparations, and sat down to repose in the atmosphere of my own happy delusions.

On the ninth the waggon arrived with the furniture, and the men set to work on the bedroom. From this moment Morgan retired definitely to the top of the tower, and Owen became too nervous to lay the necessary amount of paint on the Earthquake at Lisbon.

On the tenth the work was proceeding bravely. Towards noon, Owen and I strolled to the door to enjoy the fine autumn sunshine. We were sitting lazily on our favourite bench, in front of the tower, when we were startled by a shout from far above us. Looking up directly, we saw Morgan half in and half out of his narrow window in the seventh story, gesticulating violently with the stem of his long meerschaum pipe in the direction of the road below us.

We gazed eagerly in the quarter thus indicated, but our low position prevented us for some time from seeing anything. At last we both discerned an old yellow post-chaise, distinctly and indisputably approaching us.

Owen and I looked at one another in panic-stricken silence. It was coming to us —and what did it contain? Do pianos travel

in chaises? Are boxes of novels conveyed to their destination by a postilion? We expected the piano and expected the novels, but nothing else, unquestionably nothing else.

The chaise took the turn in the road, passed through the gateless gap in our rough enclosure-wall of loose stone, and rapidly approached us. A bonnet appeared at the window, and a hand gaily waved a white handkerchief.

Powers of caprice, confusion, and dismay! It was Jessie Yelverton herself — arriving, without a word of warning, exactly ten days before her time.

CHAPTER III.

OUR QUEEN OF HEARTS.

THE chaise stopped in front of us, and before we had recovered from our bewilderment, the gardener had opened the door and let down the steps.

A bright laughing face, prettily framed round by a black veil, passed over the head, and tied under the chin—a travelling-dress of a nankeen colour, studded with blue buttons, and trimmed with white braid—a light brown cloak over it—little neatly-

gloved hands, which seized in an instant on one of mine and on one of Owen's—two dark blue eyes which seemed to look us both through and through in a moment—a clear, full, merrily confident voice—a look and manner gaily and gracefully self-possessed: such were the characteristics of our fair guest which first struck me at the moment when she left the post-chaise and possessed herself of my hand.

"Don't begin by scolding me," she said, before I could utter a word of welcome. "There will be time enough for that in the course of the next six weeks. I beg pardon, with all possible humility, for the offence of coming ten days before my time. Don't ask me to account for it, please. If you do, I shall be obliged to confess the truth. My dear sir, the fact is, this is an act of impulse."

She paused, and looked us both in the face, with a bright confidence in her own flow of nonsense that was perfectly irresistible.

"I must tell you all about it," she ran on, leading the way to the bench, and inviting us, by a little mock gesture of supplication, to seat ourselves on either side of her. "I feel so guilty till I've told you. Dear me! how nice this is! Here I am quite at home already. Isn't it odd? Well, and how do you think it happened? The morning before yesterday, Matilda—there is Matilda, picking up my bonnet from the bottom of that remarkably musty carriage — Matilda came and woke me, as usual; and I hadn't an idea in my head, I assure you, till she began to brush my hair. Can you account for it — I can't—but she seemed, somehow, to brush

a sudden fancy for coming here into my head? When I went down to breakfast, I said to my aunt, 'Darling, I have an irresistible impulse to go to Wales at once, instead of waiting till the twentieth.' She made all the necessary objections, poor dear, and my impulse got stronger and stronger with every one of them. 'I'm quite certain,' I said, 'I shall never go at all, if I don't go now.' 'In that case,' says my aunt, 'ring the bell, and have your trunks packed. Your whole future depends on your going; and you terrify me so inexpressibly that I shall be glad to get rid of you.' You may not think it, to look at her — but Matilda is a treasure; and in three hours more I was on the Great Western Railway. I have not the least idea how I got here—except that the men helped me everywhere. They are always such de-

lightful creatures! I have been casting myself, and my maid, and my trunks on their tender mercies at every point in the journey, and their polite attentions exceed all belief. I slept at your horrid little county town last night; and the night before I missed a steamer, or a train — I forget which—and slept at Bristol; and that's how I got here. And now I am here, I ought to give my guardian a kiss —oughtn't I? Shall I call you Papa? I think I will. And shall I call *you* uncle, sir, and give you a kiss, too? We shall come to it sooner or later — shan't we? —and we may as well begin at once, I suppose."

Her fresh young lips touched my old withered cheek first, and then Owen's; a soft momentary shadow of tenderness, that was very pretty and becoming, passing

quickly over the sunshine and gaiety of her face, as she saluted us. The next moment she was on her feet again, inquiring "who the wonderful man was who built The Glen Tower," and wanting to go all over it immediately from top to bottom.

As we took her into the house, I made the necessary apologies for the miserable condition of the lean-to; and assured her that, ten days later, she would have found it perfectly ready to receive her. She whisked into the rooms — looked all round them—whisked out again—declared she had come to live in the old Tower, and not in any modern addition to it; and flatly declined to inhabit the lean-to on any terms whatever. I opened my lips to state certain objections; but she slipped away in an instant, and made straight for the Tower staircase.

"Who lives here?" she asked, calling down to us, eagerly, from the first floor landing.

"I do," said Owen, "but if you would like me to move out—"

She was away up the second flight before he could say any more. The next sound we heard, as we slowly followed her, was a peremptory drumming against the room door of the second story.

"Anybody here?" we heard her ask through the door.

I called up to her that under ordinary circumstances I was there; but that, like Owen, I should be happy to move out,—

My polite offer was cut short, as my brother's had been. We heard more drumming at the door of the third story. There were two rooms here, also—one perfectly empty—the other stocked with odds and ends of clumsy, dismal, old-fashioned fur-

niture, for which we had no use; and grimly ornamented by a life-size basket figure supporting a complete suit of armour in a sadly rusty condition. When Owen and I got to the third floor landing, the door was open; Miss Jessie had taken possession of the rooms; and we found her on a chair, dusting the man in armour with her cambric pocket-handkerchief.

"I shall live here," she said, looking round at us briskly, over her shoulder.

We both remonstrated—but it was quite in vain. She told us that she had an impulse to live with the man in armour: and that she would have her way, or go back immediately in the postchaise; which we pleased. Finding it impossible to move her, we bargained that she should, at least, allow the new bed, and the rest of the comfortable furniture in the lean-to, to be

moved up into the empty room for her sleeping accommodation. She consented to this condition; protesting, however, to the last, against being compelled to sleep in a bed, because it was a modern conventionality, out of all harmony with her place of residence and her friend in armour.

Fortunately for the repose of Morgan,—who, under other circumstances, would have discovered, on the very first day, that his airy retreat was by no means high enough to place him out of Jessie's reach—the idea of settling herself instantly, in her new habitation, excluded every other idea from the mind of our fair guest. She pinned up the nankeen-coloured travelling-dress in festoons all round her, on the spot; informed us that we were now about to make acquaintance with her in the new character of a woman of business; and darted

down stairs, in mad high spirits, screaming for Matilda and the trunks, like a child for a set of new toys. The wholesome protest of Nature against the artificial restraints of modern life expressed itself in all that she said, and in all that she did. She had never known what it was to be happy before, because she had never been allowed, until now, to do anything for herself. She was down on her knees, at one moment, blowing the fire, and telling us that she felt like Cinderella: she was up on a table, the next, attacking the cobwebs with a long broom, and wishing she had been born a housemaid. As for my unfortunate friend, the upholsterer, he was levelled to the ranks at the first effort he made to assume the command of the domestic forces, in the furniture department. She laughed at him, pushed him about, disputed all his conclusions, altered all his arrange-

ments, and ended by ordering half his bedroom furniture to be taken back again, for the one unanswerable reason that she meant to do without it.

As evening approached, the scene presented by the two rooms became eccentric to a pitch of absurdity which is quite indescribable. The grim ancient walls of the bedroom had the liveliest modern dressing-gowns and morning-wrappers hanging all about them. The man in armour had a collection of smart little boots and shoes, dangling by laces and ribbons round his iron legs. A worm-eaten, steel-clasped casket, dragged out of a corner, frowned on the upholsterer's bran new toilette-table, and held a miscellaneous assortment of combs, hair-pins, and brushes. Here stood a gloomy antique chair, the patriarch of its tribe, whose arms of blackened oak embraced a pair of pert new

deal bonnet-boxes, not a fortnight old. There, thrown down lightly on a rugged tapestry table-cover, the long labour of centuries past, lay the brief delicate work of a week ago, in the shape of silk and muslin dresses turned inside out. In the midst of all these confusions and contradictions, Miss Jessie ranged to and fro, the active centre of the whole scene of disorder, now singing at the top of her voice, and now declaring, in her light-hearted way, that one of us must make up his mind to marry her immediately, as she was determined to settle for the rest of her life at The Glen Tower.

She followed up that announcement, when we met at dinner, by inquiring if we quite understood by this time, that she had left her "company manners" in London; and that she meant to govern us all at her absolute will and pleasure, throughout the whole

period of her stay. Having thus provided, at the outset, for the due recognition of her authority by the household, generally and individually; having briskly planned out all her own forthcoming occupations and amusements, over the wine and fruit at dessert; and having positively settled, between her first and second cups of tea, where our connection with them was to begin, and where it was to end, she had actually succeeded, when the time came to separate for the night, in setting us as much at our ease, and in making herself as completely a necessary part of our household, as if she had lived among us for years and years past.

Such was our first day's experience of the formidable guest, whose anticipated visit had so sorely and so absurdly discomposed us all. I could hardly believe that I had actually wasted hours of precious

time in worrying myself and everybody else in the house about the best means of laboriously entertaining a lively high-spirited girl, who was perfectly capable, without an effort on her own part or on ours, of entertaining herself.

Having upset every one of our calculations on the first day of her arrival, she next falsified all our predictions before she had been with us a week. Instead of fracturing her skull with the pony, as Morgan had prophesied, she sat the sturdy, sure-footed, mischievous little brute as if she were part and parcel of himself. With an old waterproof cloak of mine on her shoulders, with a broad-flapped Spanish hat of Owen's on her head, with a wild imp of a Welsh boy following her as guide and groom on a bare-backed pony, and with one of the largest and ugliest cur-dogs in

England (which she had picked up, lost and starved by the wayside) barking at her heels, she scoured the country in all directions, and came back to dinner, as she herself expressed it, "with the manners of an Amazon, the complexion of a dairy-maid, and the appetite of a wolf."

On days when incessant rain kept her indoors, she amused herself with a new freak. Making friends everywhere, as became The Queen of Hearts, she even ingratiated herself with the sour old housekeeper, who had predicted so obstinately that she was certain to run away. To the amazement of everybody in the house, she spent hours in the kitchen, learning to make puddings and pies, and trying all sorts of receipts with very varying success, from an antiquated cookery-book which she had discovered at the back of my bookshelves.

At other times, when I expected her to be upstairs, languidly examining her finery, and idly polishing her trinkets, I heard of her in the stables, feeding the rabbits, and talking to the raven, or found her in the conservatory, fumigating the plants, and half suffocating the gardener, who was trying to moderate her enthusiasm in the production of smoke.

Instead of finding amusement, as we had expected, in Owen's studio, she puckered up her pretty face in grimaces of disgust at the smell of paint in the room, and declared that the horrors of the earthquake at Lisbon made her feel hysterical. Instead of showing a total want of interest in my business occupations on the estate, she destroyed my dignity as steward, by joining me in my rounds on her pony, with her vagabond retinue at her heels. Instead of

devouring the novels I had ordered for her, she left them in the box, and put her feet on it when she felt sleepy after a hard day's riding. Instead of practising for hours every evening at the piano, which I had hired with such a firm conviction of her using it, she showed us tricks on the cards, taught us new games, initiated us into the mysteries of dominoes, challenged us with riddles, and even attempted to stimulate us into acting charades—in short, tried every evening amusement in the whole category, except the amusement of music. Every new aspect of her character was a new surprise to us; and every fresh occupation that she chose was a fresh contradiction to our previous expectations. The value of experience as a guide is unquestionable in many of the most important affairs of life; but, speaking for myself

personally, I never understood the utter futility of it, where a woman is concerned, until I was brought into habits of daily communication with our fair guest.

In her domestic relations with ourselves, she showed that exquisite nicety of discrimination in studying our characters, habits, and tastes, which comes by instinct with women, and which even the longest practice rarely teaches, in similar perfection, to men. She saw, at a glance, all the underlying tenderness and generosity concealed beneath Owen's external shyness, irresolution, and occasional reserve; and, from first to last, even in her gayest moments, there was always a certain quietly-implied consideration — an easy, graceful, delicate deference — in her manner towards my eldest brother, which won upon me, and upon him, every hour in the day.

With me, she was freer in her talk, quicker in her actions, readier and bolder in all the thousand little familiarities of our daily intercourse. When we met in the morning, she always took Owen's hand, and waited till he kissed her on the forehead. In my case, she put both her hands on my shoulders, raised herself on tiptoe, and saluted me briskly on both cheeks in the foreign way. She never differed in opinion with Owen, without propitiating him first by some little artful compliment in the way of an excuse. She argued boldly with me, on every subject under the sun, law and politics included; and, when I got the better of her, never hesitated to stop me by putting her hand on my lips, or by dragging me out into the garden in the middle of a sentence.

As for Morgan, she abandoned all restraint,

in his case, on the second day of her sojourn among us. She had asked after him as soon as she was settled in her two rooms on the third story; had insisted on knowing why he lived at the top of the tower, and why he had not appeared to welcome her at the door; had entrapped us into all sorts of damaging admissions, and had thereupon discovered the true state of the case in less than five minutes.

From that time, my unfortunate second brother became the victim of all that was mischievous and reckless in her disposition. She forced him downstairs by a series of manœuvres which rendered his refuge uninhabitable, and then pretended to fall violently in love with him. She slipped little pink three-cornered notes under his door, entreating him to make appointments with her; or tenderly inquiring how he would like to

see her hair dressed at dinner on that day. She followed him into the garden — sometimes to ask for the privilege of smelling his tobacco-smoke; sometimes to beg for a lock of his hair, or a fragment of his ragged old dressing-gown, to put among her keepsakes. She sighed at him when he was in a passion, and put her handkerchief to her eyes when he was sulky. In short, she tormented Morgan, whenever she could catch him, with such ingenious and such relentless malice, that he actually threatened to go back to London, and prey once more, in the unscrupulous character of a Doctor, on the credulity of mankind.

Thus situated in her relations towards ourselves, and thus occupied by country diversions of her own choosing, Miss Jessie passed her time at The Glen Tower, excepting now and then a dull hour in the

long evenings, to her guardian's satisfaction —and, all things considered, not without pleasure to herself. Day followed day in calm and smooth succession; and five quiet weeks had elapsed out of the six during which her stay was to last, without any remarkable occurrence to distinguish them, when an event happened, which personally affected me in a very serious manner; and which suddenly caused our handsome Queen of Hearts to become the object of my deepest anxiety in the present, and of my dearest hopes for the future.

CHAPTER IV.

OUR GRAND PROJECT.

At the end of the fifth week of our guest's stay, among the letters which the morning's post brought to The Glen Tower, there was one for me, from my son, George, in the Crimea.

The effect which this letter produced in our little circle renders it necessary that I should present it here, to speak for itself.

This is what I read, alone in my own room :—

"My dearest Father :—After the great public news of the fall of Sebastopol, have you any ears left for small items of private intelligence from insignificant subaltern officers? Prepare—if you have—for a sudden and a startling announcement. How shall I write the words? How shall I tell you that I am really coming home?

"I have a private opportunity of sending this letter, and only a short time to write it in. So I must put many things, if I can, into few words. The doctor has reported me fit to travel, at last; and I leave, thanks to the privilege of a wounded man, by the next ship. The name of the vessel and the time of starting are on the list which I enclose. I have made all my calculations; and, allowing for every

possible delay, I find that I shall be with you, at the latest, on the first of November —perhaps, some days earlier.

"I am far too full of my return, and of something else connected with it which is equally dear to me, to say anything about public affairs—more especially as I know that the newspapers must, by this time, have given you plenty of information. Let me fill the rest of this paper with a subject which is very near to my heart; nearer, I am almost ashamed to say, than the great triumph of my countrymen, in which my disabled condition has prevented me from taking any share.

"I gathered from your last letter that Miss Yelverton was to pay you a visit this autumn, in your capacity of her guardian. If she is already with you, pray move heaven and earth to keep her at The Glen Tower

till I come back. Do you anticipate my confession from this entreaty? My dear, dear father, all my hopes rest on that one darling treasure which you are guarding perhaps, at this moment, under your own roof; all my happiness depends on making Jessie Yelverton my wife.

"If I did not sincerely believe that you will heartily approve of my choice, I should hardly have ventured on this abrupt confession. Now that I have made it, let me go on and tell you why I have kept my attachment, up to this time, a secret from everyone —even from Jessie herself. (You see I call her by her Christian name already!)

"I should have risked everything, father, and have laid my whole heart open before her more than a year ago, but for the order which sent our regiment out to take its share in this great struggle of the

Russian war. No ordinary change in my life would have silenced me on the subject of all others of which I was most anxious to speak—but this change made me think seriously of the future; and out of those thoughts came the resolution which I have kept until this time. For her sake, and for her sake only, I constrained myself to leave the words unspoken which might have made her my promised wife. I resolved to spare her the dreadful suspense of waiting for her betrothed husband till the perils of war might, or might not, give him back to her. I resolved to save her from the bitter grief of my death, if a bullet laid me low. I resolved to preserve her from the wretched sacrifice of herself, if I came back, as many a brave man will come back from this war, invalided for life. Leaving her untrammelled

by any engagement, unsuspicious perhaps of my real feelings towards her, I might die, and know that, by keeping silence, I had spared a pang to the heart that was dearest to me. This was the thought that stayed the words on my lips when I left England, uncertain whether I should ever come back. If I had loved her less dearly, if her happiness had been less precious to me, I might have given way under the hard restraint I imposed on myself, and might have spoken selfishly at the last moment.

"And now the time of trial is past; the war is over; and although I still walk a little lame, I am, thank God, in as good health, and in much better spirits than when I left home. Oh, father, if I should lose her now—if I should get no reward for sparing her, but the bitterest of all

disappointments! Sometimes I am vain enough to think that I made some little impression on her; sometimes I doubt if she has a suspicion of my love. She lives in a gay world—she is the centre of perpetual admiration—men with all the qualities to win a woman's heart are perpetually about her—can I, dare I, hope? Yes, I must! Only keep her, I entreat you, at The Glen Tower. In that quiet world, in that freedom from frivolities and temptations, she will listen to me as she might listen nowhere else. Keep her, my dearest, kindest father—and, above all things, breathe not a word to her of this letter. I have surely earned the privilege of being the first to open her eyes to the truth. She must know nothing, now that I am coming home, till she knows all from my own lips."

Here the writing hurriedly broke off. I am only giving myself credit for common feeling, I trust, when I confess that what I read deeply affected me. I think I never felt so fond of my boy, and so proud of him, as at the moment when I laid down his letter.

As soon as I could control my spirits, I began to calculate the question of time with a trembling eagerness, which brought back to my mind my own young days of love and hope. My son was to come back, at the latest, on the first of November; and Jessie's allotted six weeks would expire on the twenty-second of October. Ten days too soon! But for the caprice which had brought her to us exactly that number of days before her time, she would have been in the house, as a matter of necessity, on George's return.

I searched back in my memory for a conver-

sation that I had held with her, a week since, on her future plans. Towards the middle of November, her aunt, Lady Westwick, had arranged to go to her house in Paris; and Jessie was of course to accompany her—to accompany her into that very circle of the best English and the best French society, which contained in it the elements most adverse to George's hopes. Between this time and that, she had no special engagement; and she had only settled to write and warn her aunt of her return to London, a day or two before she left The Glen Tower.

Under these circumstances, the first, the all important necessity was to prevail on her to prolong her stay beyond the allotted six weeks, by ten days. After the caution to be silent, impressed on me (and most naturally, poor boy) in George's letter, I felt that I could only appeal to her on the ordinary

ground of hospitality. Would this be sufficient to effect the object?

I was sure that the hours of the morning and the afternoon had, thus far, been fully and happily occupied by her various amusements, indoors and out. She was no more weary of her days now, than she had been when she first came among us. But I was by no means so certain that she was not tired of her evenings. I had latterly noticed symptoms of weariness after the lamps were lit, and a suspicious regularity in retiring to bed the moment the clock struck ten. If I could provide her with a new amusement for the long evenings, I might leave the days to take care of themselves, and might then make sure (seeing that she had no special engagement in London until the middle of November) of her being sincerely thankful and ready to prolong her stay.

How was this to be done? The piano and the novels had both failed to attract her. What other amusement was there to offer?

It was useless, at present, to ask myself such questions as these. I was too much agitated to think collectedly on the most trifling subjects. I was even too restless to stay in my own room. My son's letter had given me so fresh an interest in Jessie, that I was now as impatient to see her as if we were about to meet for the first time. I wanted to look at her with my new eyes, to listen to her with my new ears, to study her secretly with my new purposes and my new hopes and fears. To my dismay—for I wanted the very weather itself to favour George's interests—it was raining heavily that morning. I knew, therefore, that I should probably find her in her own sitting-room. When I knocked at her door, with George's

letter crumpled up in my hand, with George's hopes in full possession of my heart, it is no exaggeration to say that my nerves were almost as much fluttered, and my ideas almost as much confused, as they were on a certain memorable day, in the far past, when I rose, in a bran new wig and gown, to set my future prospects at the Bar on the hazard of my first speech.

When I entered the room, I found Jessie leaning back languidly in her largest arm-chair, watching the rain-drops dripping down the window pane. The unfortunate box of novels was open by her side; and the books were lying for the most part strewed about on the ground at her feet. One volume lay open, back upwards, on her lap; and her hands were crossed over it listlessly. To my great dismay she was yawning, palpably and widely yawning, when I came in.

No sooner did I find myself in her presence than an irresistible anxiety to make some secret discovery of the real state of her feelings towards George took possession of me. After the customary condolences on the imprisonment to which she was subjected by the weather, I said, in as careless a manner as it was possible to assume :—

"I have heard from my son this morning. He talks of being ordered home, and tells me I may expect to see him before the end of the year."

I was too cautious to mention the exact date of his return; for, in that case, she might have detected my motive for asking her to prolong her visit.

"Oh, indeed?" she said. "How very nice! How glad you must be!"

I watched her narrowly. The clear dark blue eyes met mine as openly as ever. The

smooth round cheeks kept their fresh colour quite unchanged. The full, good-humoured, smiling lips never trembled or altered their expression in the slightest degree. Her light checked silk dress, with its pretty trimming of cherry-coloured ribbon, lay quite still over the bosom beneath it. For all the information I could get from her look and manner, we might as well have been a hundred miles apart from each other. Is the best woman in the world little better than a fathomless abyss of duplicity on certain occasions, and where certain feelings of her own are concerned? I would rather not think that; and yet I don't know how to account otherwise for the masterly manner in which Miss Jessie contrived to baffle me.

I was afraid, literally afraid, to broach the subject of prolonging her sojourn with us, on a rainy day. So I changed the topic, in des-

pair, to the novels that were scattered about her.

"Can you find nothing there," I asked, "to amuse you this wet morning?"

"There are two or three good novels," she said carelessly, "but I read them before I left London."

"And the others won't even do for a dull day in the country?" I went on.

"They might do for some people," she answered, "but not for me. I'm rather peculiar, perhaps, in my tastes. I'm sick to death of novels with an earnest purpose. I'm sick to death of outbursts of eloquence, and large-minded philanthropy, and graphic descriptions, and unsparing anatomy of the human heart, and all that sort of thing. Good gracious me! isn't it the original intention or purpose, or whatever you call it, of a work of fiction to set out distinctly by telling

a story? And how many of these books, I should like to know, do that? Why, so far as telling a story is concerned, the greater part of them might as well be sermons as novels. Oh, dear me! what I want is something that seizes hold of my interest, and makes me forget when it is time to dress for dinner; something that keeps me reading, reading, reading, in a breathless state to find out the end. You know what I mean—at least you ought. Why, there was that little chance story you told me yesterday in the garden—don't you remember, about your strange client, whom you never saw again?—I declare it was much more interesting than half these novels, *because* it was a story. Tell me another about your young days, when you were seeing the world, and meeting with all sorts of remarkable people. Or, no—don't tell it now—keep it till the evening

when we all want something to stir us up. You old people might amuse us young ones out of your own resources, oftener than you do. It was very kind of you to get me these books; but, with all respect to them, I would rather have the rummaging of your memory than the rummaging of this box. What's the matter? Are you afraid I have found out the window in your bosom already?"

I had half risen from my chair at her last words; and I felt that my face must have flushed at the same moment. She had started an idea in my mind—the very idea of which I had been in search, when I was pondering over the best means of amusing her in the long autumn evenings.

I parried her questions by the best excuses I could offer; changed the conversation for the next five minutes, and then, making a

sudden remembrance of business my apology for leaving her, hastily withdrew, to devote myself to the new idea in the solitude of my own room.

A little quiet thinking convinced me that I had discovered a means, not only of occupying her idle time, but of decoying her into staying on with us, evening by evening, until my son's return. The new project, which she had herself unconsciously suggested, involved nothing less than acting forthwith on her own chance hint, and appealing to her interest and curiosity by the recital of incidents and adventures drawn from my own personal experience, and, if I could get them to help me, from the experience of my brothers as well. Strange people and startling events had connected themselves with Owen's past life as a clergyman, with Morgan's past life as a doctor, and with my past life as a lawyer, which offered

elements of interest of a strong and striking kind ready to our hands. If these narratives were written plainly and unpretendingly, if one of them was read every evening under circumstances that should pique the curiosity and impress the imagination of our young guest, the very occupation was found for her weary hours which would gratify her tastes, appeal to her natural interest in the early lives of my brothers and myself, and lure her insensibly into prolonging her visit by ten days without exciting a suspicion of our real motive for detaining her.

I sat down at my desk; I hid my face in my hands, to keep out all impressions of external and present things; and I searched back through the mysterious labyrinth of the Past, through the dim, ever-deepening twilight of the years that were gone.

Slowly, out of the awful shadows, the

Ghosts of Memory rose about me. The dead population of a vanished world came back to life round me, a living man. Men and women whose earthly pilgrimage had ended long since, returned upon me from the unknown spheres; and fond familiar voices burst their way back to my ears through the heavy silence of the grave. Moving by me, in the nameless inner light which no eye saw but mine, the dread procession of immaterial scenes and beings unrolled its silent length. I saw once more the pleading face of a friend of early days, with the haunting vision that had tortured him through life, by his side again—with the long-forgotten despair in his eyes which had once touched my heart, and bound me to him till I had tracked his destiny through its darkest windings to the end. I saw the figure of an innocent woman passing to and fro, in an ancient country-house, with the shadow of a

strange suspicion stealing after her, wherever she went. I saw a man worn by hardship and old age stretched dreaming on the straw of a stable, and muttering in his dream the terrible secret of his life. Other scenes and persons followed these, less vivid in their revival, but still always recognisable and distinct. A young girl alone by night, and in peril of her life, in a cottage on a dreary moor. An upper chamber of an Inn, with two beds in it; the curtains of one bed closed, and a man standing by them, waiting, yet dreading, to draw them back. A husband secretly following the traces of a mystery which his wife's anxious love had fatally hidden from him since the day when they first met. These, and other visions like them, shadowy reflections of the living beings and the real events that had been once, peopled the solitude and the emptiness around me.

They haunted me still, when I tried to break the chain of thought which my own efforts had wound about my mind; they followed me to and fro in the room; and they came out with me when I left it. I had lifted the veil from the Past for myself; and I was now to rest no more till I had lifted it for others.

I went at once to my eldest brother, and showed him my son's letter, and told him all that I have written here. His kind heart was touched, as mine had been. He felt for my suspense; he shared my anxiety; he laid aside his own occupation on the spot.

"Only tell me," he said, "how I can help, and I will give every hour in the day to you and to George."

I had come to him with my mind almost as full of his past life as of my own; I recalled to his memory events in his experience as a working clergyman in London; I set him

looking among papers which he had preserved for half his lifetime, and the very existence of which he had forgotten long since; I recalled to him the names of persons to whose necessities he had ministered in his sacred office, and whose stories he had heard from their own lips, or received under their own handwriting. When we parted, he was certain of what he was wanted to do, and was resolute on that very day to begin the work.

I went to Morgan next, and appealed to him, as I had already appealed to Owen. It was only part of his odd character to start all sorts of eccentric objections in reply; to affect a cynical indifference, which he was far from really and truly feeling; and to indulge in plenty of quaint sarcasm on the subject of Jessie and his nephew George. I waited till these little surface-ebullitions had all expended themselves, and then pressed my

point again with the earnestness and anxiety that I really felt.

Evidently touched by the manner of my appeal to him, even more than by the language in which it was expressed, Morgan took refuge in his customary abruptness, spread out his paper violently on the table, seized his pen and ink, and told me quite fiercely to give him his work and let him tackle it at once.

I set myself to recall to his memory some very remarkable experiences of his own in his professional days; but he stopped me before I had half done.

"I understand," he said, taking a savage dip at the ink, "I'm to make her flesh creep, and to frighten her out of her wits. I'll do it with a vengeance!"

Reserving to myself privately an editorial right of supervision over Morgan's contri-

butions, I returned to my own room to begin my share—by far the largest one—of the task before us. The stimulus applied to my mind by my son's letter must have been a strong one indeed; for I had hardly been more than an hour at my desk, before I found the old literary facility of my youthful days, when I was a writer for the magazines, returning to me as if by magic. I worked on unremittingly till dinner-time; and then resumed the pen after we had all separated for the night. At two o'clock the next morning, I found myself—God help me!—masquerading, as it were, in my own long-lost character of a hard-writing young man, with the old familiar cup of strong tea by my side, and the old familiar wet towel tied round my head.

My review of the progress I had made, when I looked back at my pages of manu-

script, yielded all the encouragement I wanted to drive me on. It is only just, however, to add to the record of this first day's attempt, that the literary labour which it involved was by no means of the most trying kind. The great strain on the intellect — the strain of invention — was spared me, by my having real characters and events ready to my hand. If I had been called on to create, I should, in all probability, have suffered severely by contrast with the very worst of those unfortunate novelists whom Jessie had so rashly and so thoughtlessly condemned. It is not wonderful that the public should rarely know how to estimate the vast service which is done to them by the production of a good book, seeing that they are, for the most part, utterly ignorant of the immense difficulty of writing even a bad one.

The next day was fine, to my great

relief; and our visitor, while we were at work, enjoyed her customary scamper on the pony, and her customary rambles afterwards in the neighbourhood of the house. Although I had interruptions to contend with on the part of Owen and Morgan—neither of whom possessed my experience in the production of what heavy people call "light literature," and both of whom consequently wanted assistance—still I made great progress, and earned my hours of repose on the evening of the second day.

On that evening I risked the worst, and opened my negotiations for the future with "The Queen of Hearts."

About an hour after the tea had been removed, and when I happened to be left alone in the room with her, I noticed that she rose suddenly and went to the writing-table. My suspicions were aroused directly

—and I entered on the dangerous subject by inquiring if she intended to write to her aunt.

"Yes," she said. "I promised to write when the last week came. If you had paid me the compliment of asking me to stay a little longer, I should have returned it by telling you I was sorry to go. As it is, I mean to be sulky and say nothing."

With those words she took up her pen to begin the letter.

"Wait a minute," I remonstrated. "I was just on the point of begging you to stay when I spoke."

"Were you indeed?" she returned. "I never believed in coincidences of that sort before—but now, of course, I put the most unlimited faith in them!"

"Will you believe in plain proofs?" I asked, adopting her humour. "How do you

think I and my brothers have been employing ourselves all day to-day and all day yesterday? Guess what we have been about."

"Congratulating yourselves in secret on my approaching departure," she answered, tapping her chin saucily with the feather end of her pen.

I seized the opportunity of astonishing her, and forthwith told her the truth. She started up from the table, and approached me with the eagerness of a child, her eyes sparkling, and her cheeks flushed.

"Do you really mean it?" she said.

I assured her that I was in earnest. She thereupon not only expressed an interest in our undertaking, which was evidently sincere — but, with characteristic impatience, wanted to begin the first evening's reading on that very night. I disappointed her

sadly by explaining that we required time to prepare ourselves; and by assuring her that we should not be ready for the next five days. On the sixth day, I added, we should be able to begin, and to go on, without missing an evening, for probably ten days more.

"The next five days?" she repeated. "Why that will just bring us to the end of my six weeks' visit. I suppose you are not setting a trap to catch me? This is not a trick of you three cunning old gentlemen to make me stay on, is it?"

I quailed inwardly as that dangerously close guess at the truth passed her lips.

"You forget," I said, "that the idea only occurred to me after what you said yesterday. If it had struck me earlier, we should have

been ready earlier—and then, where would your suspicions have been?"

"I am ashamed of having felt them," she said in her frank, hearty way. "I retract the word 'trap,' and I beg pardon for calling you 'three cunning old gentlemen.' But what am I to say to my aunt?"

She moved back to the writing-table as she spoke.

"Say nothing," I replied, "till you have heard the first story. Shut up the paper-case till that time; and then decide when you will open it again to write to your aunt."

She hesitated, and smiled. That terribly close guess of hers was not out of her mind yet.

"I rather fancy," she said slyly, "that the first story will turn out to be the best of the whole series."

"Wrong again," I retorted. "I have a plan for letting chance decide which of the stories the first one shall be. They shall be all numbered as they are done; corresponding numbers shall be written inside folded pieces of card and well mixed together; you shall pick out any one card you like; you shall declare the number written within; and, good or bad, the story that answers to that number shall be the story that is read. Is that fair?"

"Fair!" she exclaimed. "It's better than fair; it makes *me* of some importance — and I must be more or less than woman not to appreciate that."

"Then you consent to wait patiently for the next five days?"

"As patiently as I can."

"And you engage to decide nothing

about writing to your aunt, until you have heard the first story?"

"I do," she said, returning to the writing-table. "Behold the proof of it." She raised her hand with theatrical solemnity, and closed the paper-case with an impressive bang.

I leaned back in my chair, with my mind at ease for the first time since the receipt of my son's letter.

"Only let George return by the first of November," I thought to myself, "and all the aunts in Christendom shall not prevent Jessie Yelverton from being here to meet him."

THE TEN DAYS.

THE FIRST DAY.

SHOWERY and unsettled. In spite of the weather, Jessie put on my macintosh cloak and rode off over the hills to one of Owen's outlying farms. She was already too impatient to wait quietly for the evening's reading in the house; or to enjoy any amusement less exhilarating than a gallop in the open air.

I was, on my side, as anxious and as uneasy as our guest. Now that the six weeks of her stay had expired—now that

the day had really arrived, on the evening of which the first story was to be read—I began to calculate the chances of failure as well as the chances of success. What if my own estimate of the interest of the stories turned out to be a false one? What if some unforeseen accident occurred to delay my son's return beyond ten days?

The arrival of the newspaper had already become an event of the deepest importance to me. Unreasonable as it was to expect any tidings of George at so early a date, I began, nevertheless, on this first of our days of suspense, to look for the name of his ship in the columns of telegraphic news. The mere mechanical act of looking was some relief to my overstrained feelings —although I might have known, and did know, that the search, for the present, could lead to no satisfactory result.

Towards noon, I shut myself up with my collection of manuscripts, to revise them for the last time. Our exertions had thus far produced but six of the necessary ten stories. As they were only, however, to be read, one by one, on six successive evenings, and as we could therefore count on plenty of leisure in the daytime, I was in no fear of our failing to finish the little series.

Of the six completed stories, I had written two, and had found a third, in the form of a collection of letters, among my papers. Morgan had only written one; and this solitary contribution of his had given me more trouble than both my own put together, in consequence of the perpetual intrusion of my brother's eccentricities, in every part of his narrative. The process of removing these quaint turns and frisks of Morgan's humour—which, however amusing they might have been in an

Essay, were utterly out of place in a Story, appealing to suspended interest for its effect —certainly tried my patience, and my critical faculty (such as it is) more severely than any other part of our literary enterprise which had fallen to my share.

Owen's investigations among his papers had supplied us with the two remaining narratives. One was contained in a letter, and the other in the form of a diary; and both had been received by him directly from the writers. Besides these contributions, he had undertaken to help us by some work of his own; and had been engaged for the last four days in moulding certain events which had happened within his personal knowledge, into the form of a story. His extreme fastidiousness, as a writer, interfered, however, so seriously with his progress, that he was still sadly behindhand,

and was likely, though less heavily burdened than Morgan or myself, to be the last to complete his allotted task.

Such was our position, and such the resources at our command, when the first of the Ten Days dawned upon us. Shortly after four in the afternoon, I completed my work of revision; numbered the manuscripts from one to six, exactly as they happened to lie under my hand; and enclosed them all in a portfolio, covered with purple morocco, which became known from that time by the imposing title of The Purple Volume.

Miss Jessie returned from her expedition just as I was tying the strings of the portfolio; and, woman-like, instantly asked leave to peep inside, which favour, I, manlike, positively declined to grant.

As soon as dinner was over, our guest retired to array herself in magnificent evening

costume. It had been arranged that the readings were to take place in her own sitting-room; and she was so enthusiastically desirous to do honour to the occasion, that she regretted not having brought with her from London the dress in which she had been presented at court, the year before; and not having borrowed certain materials for additional splendour, which she briefly described as "aunt's diamonds."

Towards eight o'clock we assembled in the sitting-room; and a strangely assorted company we were. At the head of the table, radiant in silk and jewellery, flowers and furbelows, sat The Queen of Hearts, looking so handsome and so happy, that I secretly congratulated my absent son on the excellent taste he had shown in falling in love with her. Round this bright young creature (Owen at the foot of the table, and

Morgan and I on either side) sat her three wrinkled, grey-headed, dingily-attired hosts; and just behind her, in still more inappropriate companionship, towered the spectral figure of the man in armour, which had so unaccountably attracted her on her arrival. This strange scene was lighted up by candles in high and heavy brass sconces. Before Jessie stood a mighty china punchbowl of the olden time, containing the folded pieces of card, inside which were written the numbers to be drawn; and before Owen reposed the Purple Volume, from which one of us was to read. The walls of the room were hung all round with faded tapestry; the clumsy furniture was black with age; and in spite of the light from the sconces, the lofty ceiling was almost lost in gloom. If Rembrandt could have painted our back ground, Reynolds our guest, and Hogarth

ourselves, the picture of the scene would have been complete.

When the old clock over the tower gateway had chimed eight, I rose to inaugurate the proceedings by requesting Jessie to take one of the pieces of card out of the punch-bowl, and to declare the number.

She laughed; then suddenly became frightened and serious; then looked at me, and said "it was dreadfully like business;" and then entreated Morgan not to stare at her, or, in the present state of her nerves, she should upset the punch bowl. At last she summoned resolution enough to take out one of the pieces of card, and to unfold it.

"Declare the number, my dear," said Owen.

"Number Four," answered Jessie, making a magnificent curtsey, and beginning to look like herself again.

Owen opened the Purple Volume, searched through the manuscripts, and suddenly changed colour. The cause of his discomposure was soon explained. Malicious fate had assigned to the most diffident individual in the company the trying responsibility of leading the way. Number four was one of the two narratives which Owen had found among his own papers.

"I am almost sorry," began my eldest brother, confusedly, "that it has fallen to my turn to read first. I hardly know which I distrust most, myself or my story."

"Try and fancy you are in the pulpit again," said Morgan, sarcastically. "Gentlemen of your cloth, Owen, seldom seem to distrust themselves or their manuscripts, when they get into that position."

"The fact is," continued Owen, mildly impenetrable to his brother's cynical remark,

"that the little thing I am going to try and read, is hardly a story at all. I am afraid it is only an anecdote. I became possessed of the letter which contains my narrative under these circumstances. At the time when I was a clergyman in London, my church was attended for some months by a lady who was the wife of a large farmer in the country. She had been obliged to come to town, and to remain there for the sake of one of her children, a little boy, who required the best medical advice."—

At the words "medical advice," Morgan shook his head, and growled to himself contemptuously. Owen went on:—

"While she was attending in this way to one child, his share in her love was unexpectedly disputed by another, who came into the world rather before his time. I baptised the baby, and was asked to the little christening-

party afterwards. This was my first introduction to the lady; and I was very favourably impressed by her. Not so much on account of her personal appearance, for she was but a little woman and had no pretensions to beauty, as on account of a certain simplicity and hearty downright kindness in her manner, as well as of an excellent frankness and good sense in her conversation. One of the guests present, who saw how she had interested me, and who spoke of her in the highest terms, surprised me by inquiring if I should ever have supposed that quiet, good-humoured little woman to be capable of performing an act of courage which would have tried the nerves of the boldest man in England? I naturally enough begged for an explanation; but my neighbour at the table only smiled and said, 'If you can find an opportunity, ask her what happened at the Black

Cottage; and you will hear something that will astonish you.' I acted on the hint as soon as I had an opportunity of speaking to her privately. The lady answered that it was too long a story to tell then; and explained, on my suggesting that she should relate it on some future day, that she was about to start for her country home the next morning. 'But,' she was good enough to add, 'as I have been under great obligations to you for many Sundays past, and as you seem interested in this matter, I will employ my first leisure time, after my return, in telling you by writing, instead of by word of mouth, what really happened to me on one memorable night of my life in the Black Cottage.'

"She faithfully performed her promise. In a fortnight afterwards I received from her the narrative which I am now about to read."

BROTHER OWEN'S STORY

OF

THE BLACK COTTAGE.

To begin at the beginning, I must take you back to the time after my mother's death, when my only brother had gone to sea, when my sister was out at service, and when I lived alone with my father, in the midst of a moor in the West of England.

The moor was covered with great limestone rocks, and intersected here and there by streamlets. The nearest habitation to ours was situated about a mile and a half off, where a strip of the fertile land stretched out

into the waste, like a tongue. Here the out-buildings of the great Moor Farm, then in the possession of my husband's father, began. The Farm-lands stretched down gently into a beautiful rich valley, lying nicely sheltered by the high platform of the moor. When the ground began to rise again, miles and miles away, it led up to a country-house, called Holme Manor, belonging to a gentleman named Knifton. Mr. Knifton had lately married a young lady whom my mother had nursed, and whose kindness and friendship for me, her foster-sister, I shall remember gratefully to the last day of my life. These, and other slight particulars, it is necessary to my story that I should tell you; and it is also necessary that you should be especially careful to bear them well in mind.

My father was by trade a stone-mason. His cottage stood a mile and a half from the

nearest habitation. In all other directions we were four or five times that distance from neighbours. Being very poor people, this lonely situation had one great attraction for us—we lived rent free on it. In addition to that advantage, the stones, by shaping which my father gained his livelihood, lay all about him at his very door; so that he thought his position, solitary as it was, quite an enviable one. I can hardly say that I agreed with him, though I never complained. I was very fond of my father, and managed to make the best of my loneliness with the thought of being useful to him. Mrs. Knifton wished to take me into her service when she married, but I declined, unwillingly enough, for my father's sake. If I had gone away, he would have had nobody to live with him; and my mother made me promise on her death-bed, that he should never be left to pine

away alone in the midst of the bleak moor. Our cottage, small as it was, was stoutly and snugly built, with stone from the moor as a matter of course. The walls were lined inside and fenced outside with wood, the gift of Mr. Knifton's father to my father. This double covering of cracks and crevices, which would have been superfluous in a sheltered position, was absolutely necessary, in our exposed situation, to keep out the cold winds which, excepting just the summer months, swept over us continually, all the year round. The outside boards, covering our roughly-built stone walls, my father protected against the wet with pitch and tar. This gave to our little abode a curiously dark, dingy look, especially when it was seen from a distance; and so it had come to be called in the neighbourhood, even before I was born, the Black Cottage.

I have now related the preliminary parti-

ticulars which it is desirable that you should know, and may proceed at once to the pleasanter task of telling you my story.

One cloudy autumn day, when I was rather more than eighteen years old, a herdsman walked over from Moor Farm with a letter which had been left there for my father. It came from a builder, living at our county town, half a day's journey off, and it invited my father to come to him and give his judgment about an estimate for some stonework on a very large scale. My father's expenses for loss of time were to be paid, and he was to have his share of employment afterward, in preparing the stone. He was only too glad, therefore, to obey the directions which the letter contained, and to prepare at once for his long walk to the county town.

Considering the time at which he received the letter, and the necessity of

resting before he attempted to return, it was impossible for him to avoid being away from home for one night at least. He proposed to me, in case I disliked being left alone in the Black Cottage, to lock the door and to take me to Moor Farm to sleep with any one of the milkmaids who would give me a share of her bed. I by no means liked the notion of sleeping with a girl whom I did not know, and I saw no reason to feel afraid of being left alone for only one night; so I declined. No thieves had ever come near us; our poverty was sufficient protection against them; and of other dangers there were none that even the most timid person could apprehend. Accordingly, I got my father's dinner, laughing at the notion of my taking refuge under the protection of a milkmaid at Moor Farm.

He started for his walk as soon as he had done, saying he should try and be back by dinner-time the next day, and leaving me and my cat Polly to take care of the house.

I had cleared the table and brightened up the fire, and had sat down to my work, with the cat dozing at my feet, when I heard the trampling of horses; and, running to the door, saw Mr. and Mrs. Knifton, with their groom behind them, riding up to the Black Cottage. It was part of the young lady's kindness never to neglect an opportunity of coming to pay me a friendly visit; and her husband was generally willing to accompany her for his wife's sake. I made my best curtsey, therefore, with a great deal of pleasure, but with no particular surprise at seeing them. They dismounted

and entered the cottage, laughing and talking in great spirits. I soon heard that they were riding to the same county town for which my father was bound; and that they intended to stay with some friends there for a few days, and to return home on horseback, as they went out.

I heard this, and I also discovered that they had been having an argument, in jest, about money matters, as they rode along to our cottage. Mrs. Knifton had accused her husband of inveterate extravagance, and of never being able to go out with money in his pocket without spending it all, if he possibly could, before he got home again. Mr. Knifton had laughingly defended himself by declaring that all his pocket-money went in presents for his wife, and that, if he spent it lavishly, it was under her sole influence and superintendence.

"We are going to Cliverton now," he said to Mrs. Knifton, naming the county town, and warming himself at our poor fire just as pleasantly as if he had been standing on his own grand hearth. "You will stop to admire every pretty thing in every one of the Cliverton shop-windows; I shall hand you the purse, and you will go in and buy. When we have reached home again, and you have had time to get tired of your purchases, you will clasp your hands in amazement and declare that you are quite shocked at my habits of inveterate extravagance. I am only the banker who keeps the money—you, my love, are the spendthrift who throws it all away!"

"Am I, sir?" said Mrs. Knifton, with a look of mock indignation. "We will see if I am to be misrepresented in this way with impunity. Bessie, my dear,"

(turning to me), "you shall judge how far I deserve the character which that unscrupulous man has just given to me. *I* am the spendthrift, am I? And you are only the banker? Very well. Banker! give me my money at once, if you please."

Mr. Knifton laughed, and took some gold and silver from his waistcoat pocket.

"No, no," said Mrs. Knifton. "You may want what you have got there for necessary expenses. Is that all the money you have about you? What do I feel here?" and she tapped her husband on the chest, just over the breast-pocket of his coat.

Mr. Knifton laughed again, and produced his pocket-book. His wife snatched it out of his hand, opened it, and drew out some bank-notes, put them back again immediately, and closing the pocket-book, stepped across the room to my poor mother's

little walnut-wood book-case—the only bit of valuable furniture we had in the house.

"What are you going to do there?" asked Mr. Knifton, following his wife.

Mrs. Knifton opened the glass door of the book-case, put the pocket-book in a vacant place on one of the lower shelves, closed and locked the door again, and gave me the key.

"You called me a spendthrift just now," she said. "There is my answer. Not one farthing of that money shall you spend at Cliverton on *me*. Keep the key in your pocket, Bessie, and, whatever Mr. Knifton may say, on no account let him have it until we call again on our way back. No, Sir, I won't trust you with that money in your pocket in the town of Cliverton. I will make sure of your taking it all home again, by leaving it here in more trustworthy hands than yours, until we ride back. Bessie, my

dear, what do you say to that, as a lesson in economy inflicted on a prudent husband by a spendthrift wife?"

She took Mr. Knifton's arm while she spoke, and drew him away to the door. He protested, and made some resistance, but she easily carried her point, for he was far too fond of her to have a will of his own in any trifling matter between them. Whatever the men might say, Mr. Knifton was a model husband in the estimation of all the women who knew him.

"You will see us as we come back, Bessie. Till then, you are our banker, and the pocket-book is yours," cried Mrs. Knifton, gaily, at the door. Her husband lifted her into the saddle, mounted himself, and away they both galloped over the moor, as wild and happy as a couple of children.

Although my being trusted with money by

Mrs. Knifton was no novelty (in her maiden days she always employed me to pay her dress-maker's bills), I did not feel quite easy at having a pocket-book full of bank notes left by her in my charge. I had no positive apprehensions about the safety of the deposit placed in my hands; but it was one of the odd points in my character then (and I think it is still), to feel an unreasonably strong objection to charging myself with money responsibilities of any kind, even to suit the convenience of my dearest friends. As soon as I was left alone, the very sight of the pocket-book behind the glass-door of the book-case began to worry me; and instead of returning to my work, I puzzled my brains about finding a place to lock it up in, where it would not be exposed to the view of any chance passers-by, who might stray into the Black Cottage.

This was not an easy matter to compass in a poor house like ours, where we had nothing valuable to put under lock and key. After running over various hiding-places in my mind, I thought of my tea-caddy, a present from Mrs. Knifton, which I always kept out of harm's way in my own bedroom. Most unluckily—as it afterwards turned out—instead of taking the pocket book to the tea-caddy, I went into my room first to take the tea-caddy to the pocket-book. I only acted in this roundabout way from sheer thoughtlessness, and severely enough I was punished for it, as you will acknowledge yourself when you have read a page or two more of my story.

I was just getting the unlucky tea-caddy out of my cupboard, when I heard footsteps in the passage, and running out im-

mediately, saw two men walk into the kitchen—the room in which I had received Mr. and Mrs. Knifton. I inquired what they wanted, sharply enough, and one of them answered immediately that they wanted my father. He turned towards me, of course, as he spoke, and I recognised him as a stonemason, going among his comrades by the name of Shifty Dick. He bore a very bad character for everything but wrestling—a sport for which the working men of our parts were famous all through the county. Shifty Dick was champion, and he had got his name from some tricks in wrestling, for which he was celebrated. He was a tall, heavy man, with a lowering, scarred face, and huge hairy hands —the last visitor in the whole world that I should have been glad to see under any circumstances. His companion was a

stranger, whom he adressed by the name of Jerry—a quick, dapper, wicked-looking man, who took off his cap to me with mock politeness, and showed, in so doing, a very bald head with some very ugly-looking nobs on it. I distrusted him worse than I did Shifty Dick, and managed to get between his leering eyes and the bookcase, as I told the two that my father was gone out, and that I did not expect him back till the next day.

The words were hardly out of my mouth before I repented that my anxiety to get rid of my unwelcome visitors had made me incautious enough to acknowledge that my father would be away from home for the whole night.

Shifty Dick and his companion looked at each other when I unwisely let out the truth, but made no remark, except to ask me if I would give them a drop of cider. I

answered, sharply, that I had no cider in the house—having no fear of the consequences of refusing them drink, because I knew that plenty of men were at work within hail, in a neighbouring quarry. The two looked at each other again, when I denied having any cider to give them; and Jerry (as I am obliged to call him, knowing no other name by which to distinguish the fellow) took off his cap to me once more, and, with a kind of blackguard gentility upon him, said they would have the pleasure of calling the next day, when my father was at home. I said good afternoon as ungraciously as possible; and, to my great relief, they both left the cottage immediately afterwards.

As soon as they were well away, I watched them from the door. They trudged off in the direction of Moor Farm; and, as it was beginning to get dusk, I soon lost sight of them.

Half an hour afterwards I looked out again.

The wind had lulled with the sunset, but the mist was rising, and a heavy rain was beginning to fall. Never did the lonely prospect of the moor look so dreary as it looked to my eyes that evening. Never did I regret any slight thing more sincerely than I then regretted the leaving of Mr. Knifton's pocket-book in my charge. I cannot say that I suffered under any actual alarm, for I felt next to certain that neither Shifty Dick nor Jerry had got a chance of setting eyes on so small a thing as the pocket-book, while they were in the kitchen; but there was a kind of vague distrust troubling me — a suspicion of the night—a dislike at being left by myself, which I never remember having experienced before. This feeling so increased, after I

had closed the door and gone back to the kitchen, that, when I heard the voices of the quarrymen, as they passed our cottage on their way home to the village in the valley below Moor Farm, I stepped out into the passage with a momentary notion of telling them how I was situated, and asking them for advice and protection.

I had hardly formed this idea, however, before I dismissed it. None of the quarrymen were intimate friends of mine. I had a nodding acquaintance with them, and believed them to be honest men, as times went. But my own common sense told me that what little knowledge of their characters I had, was by no means sufficient to warrant me in admitting them into my confidence in the matter of the pocket-book. I had seen enough of poverty and poor men to know what a terrible

temptation a large sum of money is to those whose whole lives are passed in scraping up sixpences by weary hard work. It is one thing to write fine sentiments in books about incorruptible honesty, and another thing to put those sentiments in practice, when one day's work is all that a man has to set up in the way of an obstacle between starvation and his own fireside.

The only resource that remained was to carry the pocket-book with me to Moor Farm, and ask permission to pass the night there. But I could not persuade myself that there was any real necessity for taking such a course as this; and, if the truth must be told, my pride revolted at the idea of presenting myself in the character of a coward before the people at the farm. Timidity is thought rather

a graceful attraction among ladies, but among poor women it is something to be laughed at. A woman with less spirit of her own than I had, and always shall have, would have considered twice in my situation before she made up her mind to encounter the jokes of ploughmen and the jeers of milkmaids. As for me, I had hardly considered about going to the farm before I despised myself for entertaining any such notion. "No, no," thought I, "I am not the woman to walk a mile and a half through rain, and mist, and darkness, to tell a whole kitchenful of people that I am afraid. Come what may, here I stop till father gets back."

Having arrived at that valiant resolution, the first thing I did was to lock and bolt the back and front doors, and see to the security of every shutter in the house.

That duty performed, I made a blazing fire, lighted my candle, and sat down to tea, as snug and comfortable as possible. I could hardly believe now, with the light in the room, and the sense of security inspired by the closed doors and shutters, that I had ever felt even the slightest apprehension earlier in the day. I sang as I washed up the tea-things; and even the cat seemed to catch the infection of my good spirits. I never knew the pretty creature so playful as she was that evening.

The tea-things put by, I took up my knitting, and worked away at it so long that I began at last to get drowsy. The fire was so bright and comforting that I could not muster resolution enough to leave it and go to bed. I sat staring lazily into the blaze, with my knitting on my lap—sat till the splashing of the rain outside,

and the fitful, sullen sobbing of the wind, grew fainter and fainter on my ear. The last sounds I heard before I fairly dozed off to sleep were the cheerful crackling of the fire and the steady purring of the cat, as she basked luxuriously in the warm light on the hearth. Those were the last sounds before I fell asleep. The sound that woke me was one loud bang at the front door.

I started up, with my heart (as the saying is) in my mouth, with a frightful momentary shuddering at the roots of my hair—I started up breathless, cold, and motionless ; waiting in the silence, I hardly knew for what; doubtful, at first, whether I had dreamed about the bang at the door, or whether the blow had really been struck on it.

In a minute, or less, there came a second

bang, louder than the first. I ran out into the passage.

"Who's there?"

"Let us in," answered a voice, which I recognized immediately as the voice of Shifty Dick.

"Wait a bit, my dear, and let me explain," said a second voice, in the low, oily, jeering tones of Dick's companion—the wickedly clever little man whom he called Jerry. "You are alone in the house, my pretty little dear. You may crack your sweet voice with screeching, and there's nobody near to hear you. Listen to reason, my love, and let us in. We dont want cider this time—we only want a very neat-looking pocket-book which yon happen to have, and your late excellent mother's four silver tea spoons, which you keep so nice and clean on the chimney-

piece. If you let us in, we won't hurt a hair of your head, my cherub, and we promise to go away the moment we have got what we want, unless you particularly wish us to stop to tea. If you keep us out, we shall be obliged to break into the house, and then—"

"And then," burst in Shifty Dick, "we'll *mash* you!"

"Yes," said Jerry, "we'll mash you, my beauty. But you won't drive us to doing that, will you? You will let us in?"

This long parley gave me time to recover from the effect which the first bang at the door had produced on my nerves. The threats of the two villains would have terrified some women out of their senses; but the only result they produced on *me* was violent indignation. I had, thank God, a strong spirit of my own; and the cool,

contemptuous insolence of the man Jerry effectually roused it.

"You cowardly villians!" I screamed at them through the door. "You think you can frighten me because I am only a poor girl left alone in the house. You ragamuffin thieves, I defy you both! Our bolts are strong, our shutters are thick. I am here to keep my father's house safe; and keep it I will against an army of you!"

You may imagine what a passion I was in when I vapoured and blustered in that way. I heard Jerry laugh, and Shifty Dick swear a whole mouthful of oaths. Then there was a dead silence for a minute or two; and then the two ruffians attacked the door.

I rushed into the kitchen and seized the poker, and then heaped wood on the fire, and lighted all the candles I could

find; for I felt as though I could keep up my courage better if I had plenty of light. Strange and improbable as it may appear, the next thing that attracted my attention was my poor pussy, crouched up, panic-stricken, in a corner. I was so fond of the little creature that I took her up in my arms and carried her into my bedroom, and put her inside my bed. A comical thing to do in a situation of deadly peril, was it not? But it seemed quite natural and proper at the time.

All this while the blows were falling faster and faster on the door. They were dealt, as I conjectured, with heavy stones picked up from the ground outside. Jerry sang at his wicked work, and Shifty Dick swore. As I left the bedroom, after putting the cat under cover, I heard the lower panel of the door begin to crack.

I ran into the kitchen and huddled our four silver spoons into my pocket; then took the unlucky book with the bank-notes and put it in the bosom of my dress. I was determined to defend the property confided to my care with my life. Just as I had secured the pocket-book I heard the door splintering, and rushed into the passage again with my heavy kitchen poker lifted in both hands.

I was in time to see the bald head of Jerry, with the ugly-looking knobs on it, pushed into the passage through a great rent in one of the lower panels of the door.

"Get out, you villian, or I'll brain you on the spot!" I screeched, threatening him with the poker.

Mr. Jerry took his head out again much faster than he put it in.

The next thing that came through the rent was a long pitchfork, which they darted at me from the outside, to move me from the door. I struck at it with all my might, and the blow must have jarred the hand of Shifty Dick up to his very shoulder, for I heard him give a roar of rage and pain. Before he could catch at the fork with his other hand, I had drawn it inside. By this time, even Jerry lost his temper, and swore more awfully than Dick himself.

Then there came another minute of respite. I suspected they had gone to get bigger stones, and I dreaded the giving way of the whole door.

Running into the bedroom as this fear beset me, I laid hold of my chest of drawers, dragged it into the passage, and threw it down against the door. On the

top of that I heaped my father's big tool chest, three chairs, and a scuttle-ful of coals — and last, I dragged out the kitchen-table and rammed it as hard as I could against the whole barricade. They heard me as they were coming up to the door with fresh stones. Jerry said, "Stop a bit," and then the two consulted together in whispers. I listened eagerly, and just caught these words:

"Let's try it the other way."

Nothing more was said, but I heard their footsteps retreating from the door.

Were they going to besiege the back-door now?

I had hardly asked myself that question when I heard their voices at the other side of the house. The back-door was smaller than the front; but it had this advantage in the way of strength—it

was made of two solid oak boards, joined longwise, and strengthened inside by heavy cross pieces. It had no bolts like the front door, but was fastened by a bar of iron, running across it in a slanting direction, and fitting at either end into the wall.

"They must have the whole cottage down before they can break in at that door," I thought to myself. And they soon found out as much for themselves. After five minutes of banging at the back door, they gave up any farther attack in that direction, and cast their heavy stones down with curses of fury awful to hear.

I went into the kitchen and dropped on the window-seat to rest for a moment. Suspense and excitement together were beginning to tell upon me. The perspiration broke out thick on my forehead, and I

began to feel the bruises I had inflicted on my hands in making the barricade against the front door. I had not lost a particle of my resolution, but I was beginning to lose strength. There was a bottle of rum in the cupboard, which my brother the sailor had left with us the last time he was ashore. I drank a drop of it. Never before or since have I put anything down my throat that did me half so much good as that precious mouthful of rum.

I was still sitting in the window seat drying my face, when I suddenly heard their voices close behind me.

They were feeling the outside of the window against which I was sitting. It was protected, like all the other windows in the cottage, by iron bars. I listened in dreadful suspense for the sound of filing, but nothing of the sort was audible.

They had evidently reckoned on frightening me easily into letting them in, and had come unprovided with house-breaking tools of any kind. A fresh burst of oaths informed me that they had recognized the obstacle of the iron bars. I listened breathlessly for some warning of what they were going to do next, but their voices seemed to die away in the distance. They were retreating from the window. Were they also retreating from the house altogether? Had they given up the idea of effecting an entrance in despair?

A long silence followed—a silence which tried my courage even more severely than the tumult of their first attack on the cottage.

Dreadful suspicions now beset me o their being able to accomplish by treachery what they had failed to effect by force.

Well as I knew the cottage, I began to doubt whether there might not be ways of cunningly and silently entering it against which I was not provided. The ticking of the clock annoyed me; the crackling of the fire startled me. I looked out twenty times in a minute into the dark corners of the passage, straining my eyes, holding my breath, anticipating the most unlikely events, the most impossible dangers. Had they really gone? or were they still prowling about the house? Oh, what a sum of money I would have given, only to have known what they were about in that interval of silence!

I was startled at last out of my suspense in the most awful manner. A shout from one of them reached my ears on a sudden down the kitchen chimney. It was so unexpected and so horrible in the

stillness, that I screamed for the first time since the attack on the house. My worst forebodings had never suggested to me that the two villains might mount upon the roof.

"Let us in, you she devil!" roared a voice down the chimney.

There was another pause. The smoke from the wood fire, thin and light as it was in the red state of the embers at that moment, had evidently obliged the man to take his face from the mouth of the chimney. I counted the seconds while he was, as I conjectured, getting his breath again. In less than half a minute there came another shout:

"Let us in, or we'll burn the place down over your head."

Burn it? Burn what? There was nothing easily combustible but the thatch

on the roof; and that had been well soaked by the heavy rain which had now fallen incessantly for more than six hours. Burn the place over my head? How?

While I was still casting about wildly in my mind to discover what possible danger there could be of fire, one of the heavy stones placed on the thatch to keep it from being torn up by high winds, came thundering down the chimney. It scattered the live embers on the hearth all over the room. A richly furnished place, with knickknacks and fine muslin about it, would have been set on fire immediately. Even our bare floor and rough furniture gave out a smell of burning at the first shower of embers which the first stone scattered.

For an instant I stood quite horror-struck before this new proof of the devilish

ingenuity of the villains outside. But the dreadful danger I was now in recalled me to my senses immediately. There was a large canful of water in my bedroom, and I ran in at once to fetch it. Before I could get back to the kitchen, a second stone had been thrown down the chimney, and the floor was smouldering in several places.

I had wit enough to let the smouldering go on for a moment or two more, and to pour the whole of my canful of water over the fire before the third stone came down the chimney. The live embers on the floor I easily disposed of after that. The man on the roof must have heard the hissing of the fire as I put it out, and have felt the change produced in the air at the mouth of the chimney; for after the third stone had descended, no more

followed it. As for either of the ruffians themselves dropping down by the same road along which the stones had come, that was not to be dreaded. The chimney, as I well knew by our experience in cleaning it, was too narrow to give passage to anyone above the size of a small boy.

I looked upwards as that comforting reflection crossed my mind — I looked up, and saw, as plainly as I see the paper I am now writing on, the point of a knife coming through the inside of the roof just over my head. Our cottage had no upper story, and our rooms had no ceilings. Slowly and wickedly the knife wriggled its way through the dry inside thatch between the rafters. It stopped for a while, and there came a sound of tearing. That, in its turn, stopped too; there was

a great fall of dry thatch on the floor; and I saw the heavy, hairy hand of Shifty Dick, armed with the knife, come through after the fallen fragments. He tapped at the rafters with the back of the knife, as if to test their strength. Thank God, they were substantial and close together! Nothing lighter than a hatchet would have sufficed to remove any part of them.

The murderous hand was still tapping with the knife, when I heard a shout from the man Jerry, coming from the neighbourhood of my father's stone-shed in the back yard. The hand and knife disappeared instantly. I went to the back door and put my ear to it, and listened.

Both men were now in the shed. I made the most desperate efforts to call to mind what tools and other things were left in it, which might be used against me. But

my agitation confused me. I could remember nothing except my father's big stone saw, which was far too heavy and unwieldy to be used on the roof of the cottage. I was still puzzling my brains and making my head swim to no purpose, when I heard the men dragging something out of the shed. At the same instant when the noise caught my ear, the remembrance flashed across me like lightning of some beams of wood which had lain in the shed for years past. I had hardly time to feel certain that they were removing one of these beams, before I heard Shifty Dick say to Jerry:—

"Which door?"

"The front," was the answer. "We've cracked it already; we'll have it down now in no time."

Senses less sharpened by danger than mine would have understood but too easily, from

these words, that they were about to use the beam as a battering-ram against the door. When that conviction overcame me, I lost courage at last. I felt that the door must come down. No such barricade as I had constructed could support it, for more than a few minutes, against such shocks as it was now to receive.

"I can do no more to keep the house against them," I said to myself, with my knees knocking together, and the tears at last beginning to wet my cheeks. "I must trust to the night and the thick darkness, and save my life by running for it while there is yet time."

I huddled on my cloak and hood, and had my hand on the bar of the back-door, when a piteous mew from the bed-room reminded me of the existence of poor Pussy. I ran in, and huddled the creature up in my

apron. Before I was out in the passage again, the first shock from the beam fell on the door.

The upper hinge gave way. The chairs and the coal-scuttle forming the top of my barricade were hurled, rattling, on to the floor; but the lower hinge of the door, and the chest of drawers and tool-chest, still kept their places.

"One more," I heard the villains cry — "one more run with the beam, and down it comes!"

Just as they must have been starting for that "one more run," I opened the back door and fled out into the night, with the book full of bank-notes in my bosom, the silver spoons in my pocket, and the cat in my arms. I threaded my way easily enough through the familiar obstacles in the back-yard, and was out in the pitch dark-

ness of the moor, before I heard the second shock, and the crash which told me that the whole door had given way.

In a few minutes they must have discovered the fact of my flight with the pocket-book, for I heard shouts in the distance as if they were running out to pursue me. I kept on at the top of my speed, and the noise soon died away. It was so dark that twenty thieves, instead of two, would have found it useless to follow me.

How long it was before I reached the farm-house — the nearest place to which I could fly for refuge—I cannot tell you. I remember that I had just sense enough to keep the wind at my back (having observed in the beginning of the evening that it blew toward Moor Farm), and to go on resolutely through the darkness. In all

other respects, I was by this time half-crazed by what I had gone through. If it had so happened that the wind had changed after I had observed its direction early in the evening, I should have gone astray, and have probably perished of fatigue and exposure on the moor. Providentially, it still blew steadily as it had blown for hours past, and I reached the farm-house with my clothes wet through, and my brain in a high fever. When I made my alarm at the door, they had all gone to bed but the farmer's eldest son, who was sitting up late over his pipe and newspaper. I just mustered strength enough to gasp out a few words, telling him what was the matter, and then fell down at his feet, for the first time in my life, in a dead swoon.

That swoon was followed by a severe

illness. When I got strong enough to look about me again, I found myself in one of the farm-house beds — my father, Mrs. Knifton, and the doctor, were all in the room — my cat was asleep at my feet, and the pocket-book that I had saved lay on the table by my side.

There was plenty of news for me to hear, as soon as I was fit to listen to it. Shifty Dick and the other rascal had been caught, and were in prison, waiting their trial at the next assizes. Mr. and Mrs. Knifton had been so shocked at the danger I had run—for which they blamed their own want of thoughtfulness in leaving the pocket-book in my care—that they had insisted on my father's removing from our lonely home to a cottage on their land, which we were to inhabit rent free. The bank-notes that I had saved were given to me to buy

furniture with, in place of the things that the thieves had broken. These pleasant tidings assisted so greatly in promoting my recovery, that I was soon able to relate to my friends at the farm house the particulars that I have written here. They were all surprised and interested; but no one, as I thought, listened to me with such breathless attention as the farmer's eldest son. Mrs. Knifton noticed this, too, and began to make jokes about it, in her light-hearted way, as soon as we were alone. I thought little of her jesting at the time; but when I got well, and we went to live at our new home, "the young farmer," as he was called in our parts, constantly came to see us, and constantly managed to meet me out of doors. I had my share of vanity, like other young women, and I began to think of Mrs. Knifton's

jokes with some attention. To be brief, the young farmer managed one Sunday —I never could tell how—to lose his way with me in returning from Church, and before we found out the right road home again, he had asked me to be his wife.

His relations did all they could to keep us asunder and break off the match, thinking a poor stone-mason's daughter no fit wife for a prosperous yeoman. But the farmer was too obstinate for them. He had one form of answer to all their objections. "A man, if he is worth the name, marries according to his own notions, and to please himself," he used to say. "My notion is, that when I take a wife I am placing my character and my happiness — the most precious things I have to trust—in one woman's care. The woman I mean

to marry had a small charge confided to her care, and showed herself worthy of it at the risk of her life. That is proof enough for me that she is worthy of the greatest charge I can put into her hands. Rank and riches are fine things, but the certainty of getting a good wife is something better still. I'm of age, I know my own mind, and I mean to marry the stonemason's daughter."

And he did marry me. Whether I proved myself worthy or not of his good opinion is a question which I must leave you to ask my husband. All that I had to relate about myself and my doings is now told. Whatever interest my perilous adventure may excite, ends, I am well aware, with my escape to the farmhouse. I have only ventured on writing these few additional sentences, because my marriage is

the moral of my story. It has brought me the choicest blessings of happiness and prosperity; and I owe them all to my night-adventure in *The Black Cottage.*

THE SECOND DAY.

A CLEAR, cloudless, bracing autumn morning. I rose gaily, with the pleasant conviction on my mind that our experiment had, thus far, been successful beyond our hopes.

Short and slight as the first story had been, the result of it on Jessie's mind had proved conclusive. Before I could put the question to her, she declared of her own accord, and with her customary exaggeration, that she had definitely abandoned all

idea of writing to her aunt until our collection of narratives was exhausted.

"I am in a fever of curiosity about what is to come," she said, when we all parted for the night, "and, even if I wanted to leave you, I could not possibly go away now, without hearing the stories to the end."

So far, so good. All my anxieties, from this time, were for George's return. Again, to-day, I searched the newspapers; and again there were no tidings of the ship.

Miss Jessie occupied the second day by a drive to our county town to make some little purchases. Owen, and Morgan, and I were all hard at work, during her absence, on the stories that still remained to be completed. Owen desponded about ever getting done; Morgan grumbled at what he called the absurd difficulty of

writing nonsense; I worked on smoothly and contentedly, stimulated by the success of the first night.

We assembled, as before, in our guest's sitting-room. As the clock struck eight, she drew out the second card. It was Number Two. The lot had fallen on me to read next.

"Although my story is told in the first person," I said, addressing Jessie, "you must not suppose that the events related in this particular case happened to me. They happened to a friend of mine, who naturally described them to me from his own personal point of view. In producing my narrative from the recollection of what he told me, some years since, I have supposed myself to be listening to him again, and have, therefore, written in his character; and, whenever my memory would help me, as nearly as

possible in his language also. By this means, I hope I have succeeded in giving an air of reality to a story which has truth, at any rate, to recommend it. I must ask you to excuse me if I enter into no details in offering this short explanation. Although the persons concerned in my narrative have ceased to exist, it is necessary to observe all due delicacy towards their memories. Who they were, and how I became acquainted with them, are matters of no moment. The interest of the story, such as it is, stands in no need, in this instance, of any assistance from personal explanations."

With those words, I addressed myself to my task, and read as follows:—

BROTHER GRIFFITH'S STORY

OF

THE FAMILY SECRET.

CHAPTER I.

WAS it an Englishman or a Frenchman who first remarked that every family had a skeleton in its cupboard? I am not learned enough to know; but I reverence the observation, whoever made it. It speaks a startling truth through an appropriately grim metaphor—a truth which I have discovered by practical experience. Our family had a skeleton in the cupboard; and the name of it was Uncle George.

I arrived at the knowledge that this skel-

eton existed, and I traced it to the particular cupboard in which it was hidden, by slow degrees. I was a child when I first began to suspect that there was such a thing, and a grown man when I at last discovered that my suspicions were true.

My father was a doctor, having an excellent practice in a large country-town. I have heard that he married against the wishes of his family. They could not object to my mother on the score of birth, breeding, or character—they only disliked her heartily. My grandfather, grandmother, uncles, and aunts, all declared that she was a heartless, deceitful woman; all disliked her manners, her opinions, and even the expression of her face—all, with the one exception of my father's youngest brother, George.

George was the unlucky member of our family. The rest were all clever; he was slow in capacity. The rest were all remarkably handsome; he was the sort of man that no woman ever looks at twice. The rest succeeded in life; he failed. His profession was the same as my father's; but he never got on when he started in practice for himself. The sick poor, who could not choose, employed him, and liked him. The sick rich, who could—especially the ladies—declined to call him in when they could get anybody else. In experience he gained greatly by his profession; in money and reputation he gained nothing.

There are very few of us, however dull and unattractive we may be to outward appearance, who have not some strong passion, some germ of what is called romance, hidden more or less deeply in our

natures. All the passion and romance in the nature of my Uncle George lay in his love and admiration for my father.

He sincerly worshipped his eldest brother, as one of the noblest of human beings. When my father was engaged to be married, and when the rest of the family, as I have already mentioned, did not hesitate to express their unfavourable opinion of the disposition of his chosen wife, Uncle George, who had never ventured on differing with any one before, to the amazement of every body undertook the defence of his future sister-in-law in the most vehement and positive manner. In his estimation, his brothers's choice was something sacred and indisputable. The lady might, and did, treat him with unconcealed contempt, laugh at his awkwardness, grow impatient at his stammering—it made no difference to Uncle George.

She was to be his brother's wife; and, in virtue of that one great fact, she became, in the estimation of the poor surgeon, a very queen, who, by the laws of the domestic constitution, could do no wrong.

When my father had been married a little while, he took his youngest brother to live with him as his assistant.

If Uncle George had been made President of the College of Surgeons, he could not have been prouder and happier than he was in his new position. I am afraid my father never understood the depth of his brother's affection for him. All the hard work fell to George's share: the long journeys at night, the physicking of wearisome poor people, the drunken cases, the revolting cases—all the drudging, dirty business of the surgery, in short, was turned over to him; and day after day, month after month, he struggled through

it without a murmur. When his brother and his sister-in-law went out to dine with the county gentry, it never entered his head to feel disappointed at being left unnoticed at home. When the return dinners were given, and he was asked to come in at tea-time, and left to sit unregarded in a corner, it never occurred to him to imagine that he was treated with any want of consideration or respect. He was part of the furniture of the house, and it was the business as well as the pleasure of his life, to turn himself to any use to which his brother might please to put him.

So much for what I have heard from others on the subject of my Uncle George. My own personal experience of him is limited to what I remember as a mere child. Let me say something, however, first about my parents, my sister, and myself.

My sister was the eldest born and the best loved. I did not come into the world till four years after her birth; and no other child followed me. Caroline, from her earliest days, was the perfection of beauty and health. I was small, weakly, and, if the truth must be told, almost as plain-featured as Uncle George himself. It would be ungracious and undutiful in me to presume to decide whether there was any foundation or not for the dislike that my father's family always felt for my mother. All I can venture to say is, that her children never had any cause to complain of her.

Her passionate affection for my sister, her pride in the child's beauty, I remember well; as also her uniform kindness and indulgence towards me. My personal defects must have been a sore trial to her in secret, but neither she nor my father ever showed me that they perceived any difference between Caroline and

myself. When presents were made to my sister, presents were made to me. When my father and mother caught my sister up in their arms and kissed her, they scrupulously gave me my turn afterwards. My childish instinct told me that there was a difference in their smiles when they looked at me and looked at her; that the kisses given to Caroline were warmer than the kisses given to me; that the hands which dried her tears, in our childish griefs, touched her more gently than the hands which dried mine. But these, and other small signs of preference like them, were such as no parents could be expected to control. I noticed them at the time rather with wonder than with repining. I recall them now without a harsh thought either towards my father or my mother. Both loved me, and both did their duty by me. If I seem to speak constrainedly of them here, it is not on

my own account. I can honestly say that with all my heart and soul.

Even Uncle George, fond as he was of me, was fonder of my beautiful child-sister.

When I used mischievously to pull at his lank scanty hair, he would gently and laughingly take it out of my hands; but he would let Caroline tug at it till his dim, wandering, grey eyes winked and watered again with pain. He used to plunge perilously about the garden, in awkward imitation of the cantering of a horse, while I sat on his shoulders; but he would never proceed at any pace beyond a slow and safe walk when Caroline had a ride in her turn. When he took us out walking, Caroline was always on the side next the wall. When we interrupted him over his dirty work in the surgery, he used to tell me to go and play until he was ready for me; but he would put down his bottles, and clean

his clumsy fingers on his coarse apron, and lead Caroline out again, as if she had been the greatest lady in the land. Ah, how he loved her!—and, let me be honest and grateful, and add, how he loved me too!

When I was eight years old and Caroline was twelve, I was separated from home for some time. I had been ailing for many months previously; had got benefit from being taken to the seaside; and had shown symptoms of relapsing on being brought home again to the midland county in which we resided. After much consultation it was at last resolved that I should be sent to live, until my constitution got stronger, with a maiden-sister of my mother's, who had a house at a watering-place on the south coast.

I left home, I remember, loaded with presents, rejoicing over the prospect of looking at the sea again, as careless of the future and

as happy in the present as any boy could be. Uncle George petitioned for a holiday to take me to the sea-side, but he could not be spared from the surgery. He consoled himself and me by promising to make me a magnificent model of a ship.

I have that model before my eyes now while I write. It is dusty with age; the paint on it is cracked, the ropes are tangled, the sails are moth-eaten and yellow. The hull is all out of proportion, and the rig has been smiled at by every nautical friend of mine who has ever looked at it. Yet, worn out and faulty as it is—inferior to the cheapest miniature vessel now-a-days in any toy-shop window—I hardly know a possession of mine in this world, that I would not sooner part with than Uncle George's ship.

My life at the sea-side was a very happy one. I remained with my aunt more than a

year. My mother often came to see how I was going on, and, at first, always brought my sister with her. But, during the last eight months of my stay, Caroline never once appeared. I noticed also at the same period a change in my mother's manner. She looked paler and more anxious at each succeeding visit, and always had long conferences in private with my aunt. At last she ceased to come and see us altogether, and only wrote to know how my health was getting on. My father, too, who had at the earlier periods of my absence from home, travelled to the seaside to watch the progress of my recovery as often as his professional engagements would permit, now kept away like my mother. Even Uncle George, who had never been allowed a holiday to come and see me, but who had hitherto often written and begged me to write to him, broke off our correspondence.

I was naturally perplexed and amazed by these changes, and persecuted my aunt to tell me the reason of them. At first she tried to put me off with excuses; then she admitted that there was trouble in our house; and finally she confessed that the trouble was caused by the illness of my sister. When I inquired what that illness was, my aunt said it was useless to attempt to explain it to me. I next applied to the servants. One of them was less cautious than my aunt, and answered my question, but in terms that I could not comprehend. After much explanation, I was made to understand that "something was growing on my sister's neck that would spoil her beauty for ever, and perhaps kill her, if it could not be got rid of." How well I remember the shudder of horror that ran through me at the vague idea of this deadly "something!" A fearful, awe-struck curiosity to

see what Caroline's illness was with my own eyes, troubled my inmost heart; and I begged to be allowed to go home and help to nurse her. The request was, it is almost needless to say, refused.

Weeks passed away, and still I heard nothing, except that my sister continued to be ill.

One day I privately wrote a letter to Uncle George, asking him in my childish way to come and tell me about Caroline's illness.

I knew where the post-office was, and slipped out in the morning unobserved and dropped my letter in the box. I stole home again by the garden, and climbed in at the window of a back parlour on the ground floor. The room above was my aunt's bed-chamber, and the moment I was inside the house, I heard moans and loud convulsive sobs proceeding from it. My aunt was a singularly quiet composed

woman. I could not imagine that the loud sobbing and moaning came from her; and I ran down terrified into the kitchen to ask the servants who was crying so violently in my aunt's room.

I found the housemaid and the cook talking together in whispers, with serious faces. They started when they saw me, as if I had been a grown-up master who had caught them neglecting their work.

"He's too young to feel it much," I heard one say to the other. "So far as he is concerned, it seems like a mercy that it happened no later."

In a few minutes they had told me the worst. It was my aunt who had been crying in the bed-room. Caroline was dead.

I felt the blow more severely than the servants or anyone else about me supposed. Still I was a child in years, and I had the

blessed elasticity of a child's nature. If I had been older, I might have been too much absorbed in grief to observe my aunt so closely as I did, when she was composed enough to see me, later in the day.

I was not surprised by the swollen state of her eyes, the paleness of her cheeks, or the fresh burst of tears that came from her when she took me in her arms at meeting. But I was both amazed and perplexed by the look of terror that I detected in her face. It was natural enough that she should grieve and weep over my sister's death; but why should she have that frightened look, as if some other catastrophe had happened?

I asked if there was any more dreadful news from home besides the news of Caroline's death. My aunt said, No, in

a strange stifled voice, and suddenly turned her face from me. Was my father dead? No. My mother? No. Uncle George? My aunt trembled all over as she said No, to that also, and bade me cease asking any more questions. She was not fit to bear them yet, she said; and signed to the servant to lead me out of the room.

The next day I was told that I was to go home after the funeral, and was taken out towards evening by the housemaid, partly for a walk, partly to be measured for my mourning clothes. After we had left the tailor's, I persuaded the girl to extend our walk for some distance along the sea-beach, telling her, as we went, every little anecdote connected with my lost sister that came tenderly back to my memory in those first days of

sorrow. She was so interested in hearing, and I in speaking, that we let the sun go down before we thought of turning back.

The evening was cloudy, and it got on from dusk to dark by the time we approached the town again. The housemaid was rather nervous at finding herself alone with me on the beach, and once or twice looked behind her distrustfully as we went on. Suddenly she squeezed my hand hard, and said—

"Let's get up on the cliff as fast as we can."

The words were hardly out of her mouth before I heard footsteps behind me—a man came round quickly to my side, snatched me away from the girl, and catching me up in his arms, without a word, covered my face with kisses. I knew he

was crying, because my cheeks were instantly wet with his tears; but it was too dark for me to see who he was, or even how he was dressed. He did not, I should think, hold me half a minute in his arms. The housemaid screamed for help, I was put down gently on the sand, and the strange man instantly disappeared in the darkness.

When this extraordinary adventure was related to my aunt, she seemed at first merely bewildered at hearing of it; but in a moment more there came a change over her face, as if she had suddenly recollected or thought of something. She turned deadly pale, and said in a hurried way, very unusual with her—

"Never mind; don't talk about it any more. It was only a mischievous trick to frighten you, I dare say. Forget

all about it, my dear — forget all about it."

It was easier to give this advice than to make me follow it. For many nights after, I thought of nothing but the strange man who had kissed me and cried over me.

Who could he be? Somebody who loved me very much, and who was very sorry. My childish logic carried me to that length. But when I tried to think over all the grown-up gentlemen who loved me very much, I could never get on, to my own satisfaction, beyond my father and my uncle George.

CHAPTER II.

I WAS taken home on the appointed day to suffer the trial — a hard one even at my tender years—of witnessing my mother's passionate grief and my father's mute despair. I remember that the scene of our first meeting after Caroline's death was wisely and considerately shortened by my aunt, who took me out of the room. She seemed to have a confused desire to keep me from leaving her after the door had closed behind us; but I broke away

and ran downstairs to the surgery, to go and cry for my lost playmate with the sharer of all our games, Uncle George.

I opened the surgery-door, and could see nobody. I dried my tears, and looked all round the room: it was empty. I ran upstairs again to Uncle George's garret-bedroom — he was not there; his cheap hair-brush and old cast-off razor-case, that had belonged to my grand-father, were not on the dressing-table. Had he got some other bedroom? I went out on the landing, and called softly, with an unaccountable terror and sinking at my heart:—

"Uncle George!"

Nobody answered; but my aunt came hastily up the garret-stairs.

"Hush!" she said. "You must never call that name out here again!"

She stopped suddenly, and looked as if her own words had frightened her.

"Is Uncle George dead?" I asked.

My aunt turned red and pale, and stammered.

I did not wait to hear what she said —I brushed past her, down the stairs— my heart was bursting—my flesh felt cold. I ran breathlessly and recklessly into the room where my father and mother had received me. They were both sitting there still. I ran up to them, wringing my hands, and crying out in a passion of tears—

"Is Uncle George dead?"

My mother gave a scream that terrified me into instant silence and stillness. My father looked at her for a moment, rang the bell that summoned the maid, then seized me roughly by the arm, and dragged me out of the room.

He took me down into the study, seated himself in his accustomed chair, and put me before him between his knees. His lips were awfully white, and I felt his two hands, as they grasped my shoulders, shaking violently.

"You are never to mention the name of Uncle George again," he said in a quick, angry, trembling whisper. "Never to me, never to your mother, never to your aunt, never to anybody in this world! Never, never, never!"

The repetition of the word terrified me even more than the suppressed vehemence with which he spoke. He saw that I was frightened, and softened his manner a little before he went on.

"You will never see Uncle George again," he said. "Your mother and I love you dearly; but if you forget what

I have told you, you will be sent away from home. Never speak that name again —mind, never! Now kiss me, and go away."

How his lips trembled — and, oh, how cold they felt on mine!

I shrunk out of the room the moment he had kissed me, and went and hid myself in the garden.

"Uncle George is gone; I am never to see him any more; I am never to speak of him again" — those were the words I repeated to myself, with indescribable terror and confusion, the moment I was alone. There was something unspeakably horrible to my young mind in this mystery which I was commanded always to respect, and which, so far as I then knew, I could never hope to see revealed. My father, my mother, my aunt

— all appeared to be separated from me now by some impassable barrier. Home seemed home no longer with Caroline dead, Uncle George gone, and a forbidden subject of talk perpetually and mysteriously interposing between my parents and me.

Though I never infringed the command my father had given me in his study (his words and looks, and that dreadful scream of my mother's, which seemed to be still ringing in my ears, were more than enough to ensure my obedience), I also never lost the secret desire to penetrate the darkness which clouded over the fate of Uncle George.

For two years I remained at home and discovered nothing. If I asked the servants about my uncle, they could only tell me that one morning he disappeared from the house. Of the members of my

father's family, I could make no inquiries. They lived far away, and never came to see us — and the idea of writing to them, at my age and in my position, was out of the question. My aunt was as unapproachably silent as my father and mother; but I never forgot how her face had altered, when she reflected for a moment, after hearing of my extraordinary adventure while going home with the servant over the sands at night. The more I thought of that change of countenance, in connection with what had occurred on my return to my father's house, the more certain I felt that the stranger who had kissed me and wept over me must have been no other than Uncle George.

At the end of my two years at home, I was sent to sea in the merchant navy by my own earnest desire. I had always deter-

mined to be a sailor from the time when I first went to stay with my aunt at the seaside—and I persisted long enough in my resolution to make my parents recognise the necessity of acceding to my wishes.

My new life delighted me; and I remained away on foreign stations more than four years. When I at length returned home, it was to find a new affliction darkening our fireside. My father had died on the very day when I sailed for my return voyage to England.

Absence and change of scene had in no respect weakened my desire to penetrate the mystery of Uncle George's disappearance. My mother's health was so delicate, that I hesitated for some time to approach the forbidden subject in her presence. When I at last ventured to refer to it, suggesting to her that any prudent reserve, which

might have been necessary while I was a child, need no longer be persisted in, now that I was growing to be a young man, she fell into a violent fit of trembling, and commanded me to say no more. It had been my father's will, she said, that the reserve to which I referred should be always adopted towards me; he had not authorised her, before he died, to speak more openly; and, now that he was gone, she would not so much as think of acting on her own unaided judgment. My aunt said the same thing in effect when I appealed to her. Determined not to be discouraged even yet, I undertook a journey, ostensibly to pay my respects to my father's family, but with the secret intention of trying what I could learn in that quarter on the subject of Uncle George.

My investigations led to some results,

though they were by no means satisfactory. George had always been looked upon with something like contempt by his handsome sisters and his prosperous brothers ; and he had not improved his position in the family by his warm advocacy of his brother's cause at the time of my father's marriage. I found that my uncle's surviving relatives now spoke of him slightingly and carelessly. They assured me that they had never heard from him, and that they knew nothing about him, except that he had gone away to settle, as they supposed, in some foreign place, after having behaved very basely and badly to my father. He had been traced to London, where he had sold out of the funds the small share of money which he had inherited after his father's death, and he had been seen on the deck of a packet bound for France,

later on the same day. Beyond this, nothing was known about him. In what the alleged baseness of his behaviour had consisted, none of his brothers and sisters could tell me. My father had refused to pain them by going into particulars, not only at the time of his brother's disappearance, but afterwards whenever the subject was mentioned. George had always been the black sheep of the flock, and he must have been conscious of his own baseness, or he would certainly have written to explain and to justify himself.

Such were the particulars which I gleaned during my visit to my father's family. To my mind, they tended rather to deepen than to reveal the mystery. That such a gentle, docile, affectionate creature as Uncle George should have injured the brother he loved, by word or

deed, at any period of their intercourse, seemed incredible; but that he should have been guilty of an act of baseness at the very time when my sister was dying, was simply and plainly impossible. And yet, there was the incomprehensible fact staring me in the face, that the death of Caroline and the disappearance of Uncle George had taken place in the same week! Never did I feel more daunted and bewildered by the family secret, than after I had heard all the particulars in connection with it that my father's relatives had to tell me.

I may pass over the events of the next few years of my life briefly enough.

My nautical pursuits filled up all my time, and took me far away from my country and my friends. But, whatever I did, and wherever I went, the memory of

Uncle George, and the desire to penetrate the mystery of his disappearance, haunted me like familiar spirits. Often, in the lonely watches of the night at sea, did I recall the dark evening on the beach, the strange man's hurried embrace, the startling sensation of feeling his tears on my cheeks, the disappearance of him before I had breath or self-possession enough to say a word. Often did I think over the inexplicable events that followed, when I had returned, after my sister's funeral, to my father's house; and oftener still did I puzzle my brains vainly, in the attempt to form some plan for inducing my mother or my aunt to disclose the secret which they had hitherto kept from me so perseveringly. My only chance of knowing what had really happened to Uncle George, my only hope of seeing him again, rested with those

two near and dear relatives. I despaired of ever getting my mother to speak on the forbidden subject after what had passed between us; but I felt more sanguine about my prospects of ultimately inducing my aunt to relax in her discretion. My anticipations, however, in this direction were not destined to be fulfilled. On my next visit to England I found my aunt prostrated by a paralytic attack, which deprived her of the power of speech. She died soon afterwards in my arms, leaving me her sole heir. I searched anxiously among her papers for some reference to the family mystery, but found no clue to guide me. All my mother's letters to her sister at the time of Caroline's illness and death had been destroyed.

CHAPTER III.

MORE years passed; my mother followed my aunt to the grave; and still I was as far as ever from making any discoveries in relation to Uncle George. Shortly after the period of this last affliction, my health gave way, and I departed, by my doctor's advice, to try some baths in the south of France.

I travelled slowly to my destination, turning aside from the direct road, and stopping wherever I pleased. One evening, when I was not more than two or three days' journey

from the baths to which I was bound, I was struck by the picturesque situation of a little town placed on the brow of a hill at some distance from the main road, and resolved to have a nearer look at the place, with a view to stopping there for the night, if it pleased me. I found the principal inn clean and quiet—ordered my bed there—and after dinner strolled out to look at the church. No thought of Uncle George was in my mind when I entered the building; and yet, at that very moment, chance was leading me to the discovery which, for so many years past, I had vainly endeavoured to make—the discovery which I had given up as hopeless since the day of my mother's death.

I found nothing worth notice in the church, and was about to leave it again, when I caught a glimpse of a pretty view

through a side door, and stopped to admire it.

The churchyard formed the foreground, and below it the hill-side sloped away gently into the plain, over which the sun was setting in full glory. The *curé* of the church was reading his breviary, walking up and down a gravel-path that parted the rows of graves. In the course of my wanderings I had learnt to speak French as fluently as most Englishmen; and when the priest came near me I said a few words in praise of the view, and complimented him on the neatness and prettiness of the churchyard. He answered with great politeness, and we got into conversation together immediately.

As we strolled along the gravel-walk, my attention was attracted by one of the graves standing apart from the rest. The cross at the head of it differed remarkably, in

some points of appearance, from the crosses on the other graves. While all the rest had garlands hung on them, this one cross was quite bare; and, more extraordinary still, no name was inscribed on it.

The priest, observing that I stopped to look at the grave, shook his head and sighed.

"A countryman of yours is buried there," he said. "I was present at his death. He had borne the burden of a great sorrow among us, in this town, for many weary years, and his conduct had taught us to respect and pity him with all our hearts."

"How is it that his name is not inscribed over his grave?" I inquired.

"It was suppressed by his own desire," answered the priest, with some little hesitation. "He confessed to me in his last moments that he had lived here under an

assumed name. I asked his real name, and he told it to me, with the particulars of his sad story. He had reasons for desiring to be forgotten after his death. Almost the last words he spoke were, 'Let my name die with me.' Almost the last request he made was, that I would keep that name a secret from all the world excepting only one person."

"Some relative, I suppose?" said I.

"Yes—a nephew," said the priest.

The moment the last word was out of his mouth, my heart gave a strange answering bound. I suppose I must have changed colour also, for the *curé* looked at me with sudden attention and interest.

"A nephew," the priest went on, "whom he had loved like his own child. He told me that if this nephew ever traced him to his burial-place, and asked about him, I was

free in that case to disclose all I knew. 'I should like my little Charley to know the truth,' he said. 'In spite of the difference in our ages, Charley and I were playmates years ago.'"

My heart beat faster, and I felt a choking sensation at the throat, the moment I heard the priest unconsciously mention my Christian name in reporting the dying man's last words.

As soon as I could steady my voice and feel certain of my self-possession, I communicated my family name to the *curé*, and asked him if that was not part of the secret that he had been requested to preserve.

He started back several steps, and clasped his hands amazedly.

"Can it be?" he said in low tones, gazing at me earnestly, with something like dread in his face.

I gave him my passport, and looked away towards the grave. The tears came into my eyes as the recollections of past days crowded back on me. Hardly knowing what I did, I knelt down by the grave, and smoothed the grass over it with my hand. O Uncle George, why not have told your secret to your old playmate? Why leave him to find you *here?*

The priest raised me gently, and begged me to go with him into his own house. On our way there, I mentioned persons and places that I thought my uncle might have spoken of, in order to satisfy my companion that I was really the person I represented myself to be. By the time we had entered his little parlour, and had sat down alone in it, we were almost like old friends together.

I thought it best that I should begin

by telling all that I have related here on the subject of Uncle George, and his disappearance from home. My host listened with a very sad face, and said, when I had done:—

"I can understand your anxiety to know what I am authorised to tell you —but pardon me if I say first that there are circumstances in your uncle's story which it may pain you to hear—" he stopped suddenly.

"Which it may pain me to hear, as a nephew?" I asked.

"No," said the priest, looking away from me,—"as a son."

I gratefully expressed my sense of the delicacy and kindness which had prompted my companion's warning, but I begged him at the same time to keep me no longer in suspense, and to tell me the stern

truth, no matter how painfully it might affect me as a listener.

"In telling me all you knew about what you term the Family Secret," said the priest, "you have mentioned as a strange coincidence that your sister's death and your uncle's disappearance took place at the same time. Did you ever suspect what cause it was that occasioned your sister's death?"

"I only knew what my father told me, and what all our friends believed — that she died of a tumour in the neck, or, as I sometimes heard it stated, from the effect on her constitution of a tumour in the neck."

"She died under an operation for the removal of that tumour," said the priest, in low tones. "And the operator was your Uncle George."

In those few words all the truth burst upon me.

"Console yourself with the thought that the long martyrdom of his life is over," the priest went on. "He rests: he is at peace. He and his little darling understand each other, and are happy now. That thought bore him up to the last, on his death-bed. He always spoke of your sister as his 'little darling.' He firmly believed that she was waiting to forgive and console him in the other world — and who shall say he was deceived in that belief?"

Not I! Not anyone who has ever loved and suffered, surely!

"It was out of the depths of his self-sacrificing love for the child that he drew the fatal courage to undertake the operation," continued the priest. "Your father naturally shrank from attempting it. His

medical brethren, whom he consulted, all doubted the propriety of taking any measures for the removal of the tumour, in the particular condition and situation of it when they were called in. Your uncle alone differed with them. He was too modest a man to say so, but your mother found it out. The deformity of her beautiful child horrified her; she was desperate enough to catch at the faintest hope of remedying it that anyone might hold out to her; and she persuaded your uncle to put his opinion to the proof. Her horror at the deformity of the child, and her despair at the prospect of its lasting for life, seem to have utterly blinded her to all natural sense of the danger of the operation. It is hard to know how to say it to you, her son, but it must be told, nevertheless, that, one day, when your

father was out, she untruly informed your uncle that his brother had consented to the performance of the operation, and that he had gone purposely out of the house because he had not nerve enough to stay and witness it. After that, your uncle no longer hesitated. He had no fear of results, provided he could be certain of his own courage. All he dreaded was the effect on him of his love for the child, when he first found himself face to face with the dreadful necessity of touching her skin with the knife."

I tried hard to control myself; but I could not repress a shudder at those words.

"It is useless to shock you by going into particulars," said the priest, considerately. "Let it be enough if I say that your uncle's fortitude failed to support him when he wanted it most. His love for the child shook

the firm hand which had never trembled before. In a word, the operation failed. Your father returned, and found his child dying. The frenzy of his despair, when the truth was told him, carried him to excesses which it shocks me to mention—excesses which began in his degrading his brother by a blow, which ended in his binding himself by an oath to make that brother suffer public punishment, for his fatal rashness, in a court of law. Your uncle was too heart-broken by what had happened to feel those outrages as some men might have felt them. He looked for one moment at his sister-in-law (I do not like to say your mother, considering what I have now to tell you), to see if she would acknowledge that she had encouraged him to attempt the operation, and that she had deceived him in saying that he had his brother's permission to try

it. She was silent, and when she spoke, it was to join her husband in denouncing him as the murderer of their child. Whether fear of your father's anger, or revengeful indignation against your uncle most actuated her, I cannot presume to inquire in your presence. I can only state facts."

The priest paused, and looked at me anxiously. I could not speak to him at that moment—I could only encourage him to proceed by pressing his hand.

He resumed in these terms:—

"Meanwhile, your uncle turned to your father, and spoke the last words he was ever to address to his eldest brother in this world. He said:—'I have deserved the worst your anger can inflict on me, but I will spare you the scandal of bringing me to justice in open court. The law, if it

found me guilty, could at the worst but banish me from my country and my friends. I will go of my own accord. God is my witness that I honestly believed I could save the child from deformity and suffering. I have risked all, and lost all. My heart and spirit are broken. I am fit for nothing, but to go and hide myself and my shame and misery from all eyes that have ever looked on me. I shall never come back, never expect your pity or forgiveness. If you think less harshly of me when I am gone, keep secret what has happened; let no other lips say of me what yours and your wife's have said. I shall think that forbearance atonement enough, atonement greater than I have deserved. Forget me in this world. May we meet in another, where the secrets of all hearts are opened, and where the child who is gone before may make peace between us!'

He said those words and went out. Your father never saw him or heard from him again."

I knew the reason now why my father had never confided the truth to anyone, his own family included. My mother had evidently confessed all to her sister, under the seal of secrecy. And there the dreadful disclosure had been arrested.

"Your uncle told me," the priest continued, "that before he left England, he took leave of you by stealth, in a place you were staying at by the seaside. He had not the heart to quit his country and his friends for ever, without kissing you for the last time. He followed you in the dark, and caught you up in his arms, and left you again before you had a chance of discovering him. The next day he quitted England."

"For this place?" I asked.

"Yes: he had spent a week here once with a student friend, at the time when he was a pupil in the Hôtel Dieu. And to this place he returned to hide, to suffer, and to die. We all saw that he was a man crushed and broken by some great sorrow, and we respected him and his affliction. He lived alone, and only came out of doors towards evening, when he used to sit on the brow of the hill yonder, with his head on his hand, looking towards England. That place seemed a favourite with him, and he is buried close by it. He revealed the story of his past life to no living soul here but me; and to me he only spoke when his last hour was approaching. What he had suffered during his long exile, no man can presume to say. I, who saw more of him than anyone, never heard a word of complaint fall from his lips. He had the courage of the

martyrs while he lived, and the resignation of the saints when he died. Just at the last his mind wandered. He said he saw his little darling waiting by the bedside to lead him away; and he died with a smile on his face—the first I had ever seen there."

The priest ceased, and we went out together in the mournful twilight, and stood for a little while on the brow of the hill where Uncle George used to sit, with his face turned towards England. How my heart ached for him, as I thought of what he must have suffered in the silence and solitude of his long exile! Was it well for me that I had discovered the Family Secret at last? I have sometimes thought not. I have sometimes wished that the darkness had never been cleared away which once hid from me the fate of Uncle George.

THE THIRD DAY.

FINE again. Our guest rode out, with her ragged little groom, as usual. There was no news yet in the paper — that is to say, no news of George, or his ship.

On this day, Morgan completed his second story ; and, in two or three days more, I expected to finish the last of my own contributions. Owen was still behindhand, and still despondent.

The lot drawn to-night was Five. This proved to be the number of the first of Morgan's stories, which he had completed before we began the readings. His second story, finished this day, being still uncorrected by me, could not yet be added to the common stock.

On being informed that it had come to his turn to occupy the attention of the company, Morgan startled us by immediately objecting to the trouble of reading his own composition; and by coolly handing it over to me, on the ground that my numerous corrections had made it, to all intents and purposes, my story.

Owen and I both remonstrated; and Jessie, mischievously persisting in her favourite jest at Morgan's expense, en-

treated that he would read, if it was only for her sake. Finding that we were all determined, and all against him, he declared that, rather than hear our voices any longer, he would submit to the minor inconvenience of listening to his own. Accordingly, he took his manuscript back again, and, with an air of surly resignation, spread it open before him.

"I don't think you will like this story, Miss," he began, addressing Jessie. "But I shall read it, nevertheless, with the greatest pleasure. It begins in a Stable —it gropes its way through a Dream—it keeps company with an Ostler—and it stops without an end. What do you think of that?"

After favouring his audience with this promising preface, Morgan indulged him-

self in a chuckle of supreme satisfaction; and then began to read, without wasting another preliminary word on any one of us.

BROTHER MORGAN'S STORY

OF

THE DREAM-WOMAN.

CHAPTER I.

I HAD not been settled much more than six weeks in my country practice, when I was sent for to a neighbouring town, to consult with the resident medical man there, on a case of very dangerous illness.

My horse had come down with me, at the end of a long ride the night before,

and had hurt himself, luckily, much more than he had hurt his master. Being deprived of the animal's services, I started for my destination by the coach (there were no railways at that time); and I hoped to get back again, towards the afternoon, in the same way.

After the consultation was over, I went to the principal inn of the town to wait for the coach. When it came up, it was full inside and out. There was no resource left me, but to get home as cheaply as I could, by hiring a gig. The price asked for this accommodation struck me as being so extortionate, that I determined to look out for an inn of inferior pretensions, and to try if I could not make a better bargain with a less prosperous establishment.

I soon found a likely-looking house,

dingy and quiet, with an old-fashioned sign, that had evidently not been repainted for many years past. The landlord, in this case, was not above making a small profit; and as soon as we came to terms, he rang the yard-bell to order the gig.

"Has Robert not come back from that errand?" asked the landlord, appealing to the waiter, who answered the bell.

"No, sir, he hasn't."

"Well, then, you must wake up Isaac."

"Wake up Isaac?" I repeated; "that sounds rather odd. Do your ostlers go to bed in the day-time?"

"This one does," said the landlord, smiling to himself in rather a strange way.

"And dreams, too," added the waiter;

"I shan't forget the turn it gave me, the first time I heard him."

"Never you mind about that," retorted the proprietor; "you go and rouse Isaac up. The gentleman's waiting for his gig."

The landlord's manner and the waiter's manner expressed a great deal more than they either of them said. I began to suspect that I might be on the trace of something professionally interesting to me, as a medical man; and I thought I should like to look at the ostler, before the waiter awakened him.

"Stop a minute," I interposed; "I have rather a fancy for seeing this man before you wake him up. I'm a doctor; and if this queer sleeping and dreaming of his comes from anything wrong in his

brain, I may be able to tell you what to do with him."

"I rather think you will find his complaint past all doctoring, sir," said the landlord. "But if you would like to see him, you're welcome, I'm sure."

He led the way across a yard and down a passage to the stables; opened one of the doors; and waiting outside himself, told me to look in.

I found myself in a two-stall stable. In one of the stalls, a horse was munching his corn. In the other, an old man was lying asleep on the litter.

I stooped and looked at him attentively. It was a withered, woe-begone face. The eyebrows were painfully contracted; the mouth was fast set, and drawn down at the corners. The hollow wrinkled cheeks, and the scanty grizzled hair, told their

own tale of some past sorrow or suffering. He was drawing his breath convulsively when I first looked at him; and in a moment more he began to talk in his sleep.

"Wake up!" I heard him say, in a quick whisper, through his clenched teeth. "Wake up there! Murder!"

He moved one lean arm slowly till it rested over his throat, shuddered a little, and turned on his straw. Then the arm left his throat, the hand stretched itself out, and clutched at the side towards which he had turned, as if he fancied himself to be grasping at the edge of something. I saw his lips move, and bent lower over him. He was still talking in his sleep.

"Light grey eyes," he murmured, "and a droop in the left eyelid—flaxen hair,

with a gold-yellow streak in it—all right, mother—fair white arms with a down on them—little lady's hand with a reddish look under the finger-nails. The knife—always the cursed knife — first on one side, then on the other. Aha! you she-devil, where's the knife?"

At the last word his voice rose, and he grew restless on a sudden. I saw him shudder on the straw; his withered face became distorted, and he threw up both his hands with a quick hysterical gasp. They struck against the bottom of the manger under which he lay, and the blow awakened him. I had just time to slip through the door and close it, before his eyes were fairly open, and his senses his own again.

"Do you know anything about that man's past life?" I said to the landlord.

"Yes, sir, I know pretty well all about it," was the answer, "and an uncommon queer story it is. Most people don't believe it. It's true though, for all that. Why, just look at him," continued the landlord, opening the stable door again. "Poor devil! he's so worn out with his restless nights, that he's dropped back into his sleep already."

"Don't wake him," I said, "I'm in no hurry for the gig. Wait till the other man comes back from his errand. And, in the mean time, suppose I have some lunch, and a bottle of sherry; and suppose you come and help me to get through it?"

The heart of mine host, as I had anticipated, warmed to me over his own wine. He soon became communicative on the subject of the man asleep in the

stable; and by little and little, I drew the whole story out of him. Extravagant and incredible as the events must appear to everybody, they are related here just as I heard them, and just as they happened.

CHAPTER II.

SOME years ago there lived in the suburbs of a large sea-port town, on the west coast of England, a man in humble circumstances, by name Isaac Scatchard. His means of subsistence were derived from any employment that he could get as an ostler, and occasionally, when times went well with him, from temporary engagements in service as stable-helper in private houses. Though a faithful, steady, and honest man, he got on badly in his calling. His ill-luck was proverbial among his neighbours. He was always missing good opportunities by no fault of his own;

and always living longest in service with amiable people who were not punctual payers of wages. "Unlucky Isaac" was his nickname in his own neighbourhood—and no one could say that he did not richly deserve it.

With far more than one man's fair share of adversity to endure, Isaac had but one consolation to support him—and that was of the dreariest and most negative kind. He had no wife and children to increase his anxieties and add to the bitterness of his various failures in life. It might have been from mere insensibility, or it might have been from generous unwillingness to involve another in his own unlucky destiny—but the fact undoubtedly was, that he had arrived at the middle term of life without marrying; and, what is much more remarkable, without once exposing himself,

from eighteen to eight-and-thirty, to the genial imputation of ever having had a sweetheart.

When he was out of service, he lived alone with his widowed mother. Mrs. Scatchard was a woman above the average in her lowly station, as to capacity and manners. She had seen better days, as the phrase is; but she never referred to them in the presence of curious visitors; and, though perfectly polite to every one who approached her, never cultivated any intimacies among her neighbours. She contrived to provide, hardly enough, for her simple wants, by doing rough work for the tailors; and always managed to keep a decent home for her son to return to, whenever his ill-luck drove him out helpless into the world.

One bleak Autumn, when Isaac was get-

ting on fast towards forty, and when he was, as usual, out of place, through no fault of his own, he set forth from his mother's cottage on a long walk inland to a gentleman's seat, where he had heard that a stable-helper was required.

It wanted then but two days of his birthday; and Mrs. Scatchard, with her usual fondness, made him promise, before he started, that he would be back in time to keep that anniversary with her in as festive a way as their poor means would allow. It was easy for him to comply with this request, even supposing he slept a night each way on the road.

He was to start from home on Monday morning; and, whether he got the new place or not, he was to be back for his birthday dinner on Wednesday at two o'clock.

Arriving at his destination too late on the Monday night to make application for the stable-helper's place, he slept at the village inn, and, in good time on the Tuesday morning, presented himself at the gentleman's house, to fill the vacant situation. Here again, his ill-luck pursued him as inexorably as ever. The excellent written testimonials to his character, which he was able to produce, availed him nothing; his long walk had been taken in vain—only the day before, the stable-helper's place had been given to another man.

Isaac accepted this new disappointment resignedly, and as a matter of course. Naturally slow in capacity, he had the bluntness of sensibility and phlegmatic patience of disposition which frequently distinguish men with sluggishly-working mental powers. He thanked the gentleman's steward with

his usual quiet civility, for granting him an interview, and took his departure with no appearance of unusual depression in his face or manner.

Before starting on his homeward walk, he made some inquiries at the inn, and ascertained that he might save a few miles, on his return, by following a new road. Furnished with full instructions, several times repeated, as to the various turnings he was to take, he set forth on his homeward journey, and walked on all day with only one stoppage for bread and cheese. Just as it was getting towards dark, the rain came on and the wind began to rise; and he found himself, to make matters worse, in a part of the country with which he was entirely unacquainted, though he knew himself to be some fifteen miles from home. The first house he found to inquire

at, was a lonely road-side inn, standing on the outskirts of a thick wood. Solitary as the place looked, it was welcome to a lost man who was also hungry, thirsty, footsore, and wet. The landlord was civil and respectable-looking; and the price he asked for a bed was reasonable enough. Isaac, therefore, decided on stopping comfortably at the inn for that night.

He was constitutionally a temperate man. His supper simply consisted of two rashers of bacon, a slice of home-made bread, and a pint of ale. He did not go to bed immediately after this moderate meal, but sat up with the landlord, talking about his bad prospects and his long run of ill-luck, and diverging from these topics to the subjects of horse-flesh and racing. Nothing was said either by himself, his host, or the few labourers who strayed into the tap-room,

which could, in the slightest degree, excite the very small and very dull imaginative faculty which Isaac Scatchard possessed.

At a little after eleven the house was closed. Isaac went round with the landlord, and held the candle while the doors and lower-windows were being secured. He noticed with surprise the strength of the bolts, bars, and iron-sheathed shutters.

"You see, we are rather lonely here," said the landlord. "We never have had any attempts made to break in yet, but it's always as well to be on the safe side. When nobody is sleeping here, I am the only man in the house. My wife and daughter are timid, and the servant-girl takes after her missuses. Another glass of ale, before you turn in?—No!—Well, how such a sober man as you comes to be out of place, is more than I can

make out, for one.—Here's where you're to sleep. You're our only lodger to-night, and I think you'll say my missus has done her best to make you comfortable. You're quite sure you won't have another glass of ale?—Very well. Good night."

It was half-past eleven by the clock in the passage as they went up stairs to the bed-room, the window of which looked on to the wood at the back of the house.

Isaac locked the door, set his candle on the chest of drawers, and wearily got ready for bed. The bleak autumn wind was still blowing, and the solemn, monotonous surging moan of it in the wood was dreary and awful to hear through the night-silence. Isaac felt strangely wakeful. He resolved, as he lay down in bed, to keep the candle a-light until he began

to grow sleepy; for there was something unendurably depressing in the bare idea of lying awake in the darkness, listening to the dismal, ceaseless moaning of the wind in the wood.

Sleep stole on him before he was aware of it. His eyes closed, and he fell off insensibly to rest, without having so much as thought of extinguishing the candle.

The first sensation of which he was conscious, after sinking into slumber, was a strange shivering that ran through him suddenly from head to foot, and a dreadful sinking pain at the heart, such as he had never felt before. The shivering only disturbed his slumbers—the pain woke him instantly. In one moment he passed from a state of sleep to a state of wakefulness—his eyes wide open—his mental perceptions cleared on a sudden as if by a miracle.

The candle had burnt down nearly to the last morsel of tallow; but the top of the unsnuffed wick had just fallen off, and the light in the little room was, for the moment, fair and full.

Between the foot of his bed and the closed door there stood a woman with a knife in her hand, looking at him.

He was stricken speechless with terror, but he did not lose the preternatural clearness of his faculties; and he never took his eyes off the woman. She said not a word as they stared each other in the face; but she began to move slowly towards the left-hand side of the bed.

His eyes followed her. She was a fair fine woman, with yellowish flaxen hair, and light grey eyes, with a droop in the left eye-lid. He noticed those things and fixed them on his mind, before she was

round at the side of the bed. Speechless, with no expression in her face, with no noise following her footfall, she came closer and closer—stopped—and slowly raised the knife. He laid his right arm over his throat to save it; but, as he saw the knife coming down, threw his hand across the bed to the right side, and jerked his body over that way, just as the knife descended on the mattress within an inch of his shoulder.

His eyes fixed on her arm and hand, as she slowly drew her knife out of the bed. A white, well-shaped arm, with a pretty down lying lightly over the fair skin. A delicate, lady's hand, with the crowning beauty of a pink flush under and round the finger-nails.

She drew the knife out, and passed back again slowly to the foot of the bed; stopped there for a moment looking at him;

then came on—still speechless, still with no expression on the blank, beautiful face, still with no sound following the stealthy footfalls —came on to the right side of the bed where he now lay.

As she approached, she raised the knife again, and he drew himself away to the left side. She struck, as before, right into the mattress, with a deliberate, perpendicularly-downward action of the arm. This time his eyes wandered from her to the knife. It was like the large clasp-knives which he had often seen labouring men use to cut their bread and bacon with. Her delicate little fingers did not conceal more than two-thirds of the handle; he noticed that it was made of buckhorn, clean and shining as the blade was, and looking like new.

For the second time she drew the knife

out, concealed it in the wide sleeve of her gown, then stopped by the bedside, watching him. For an instant he saw her standing in that position—then the wick of the spent candle fell over into the socket. The flame diminished to a little blue point, and the room grew dark.

A moment, or less, if possible, passed so —and then the wick flamed up, smokily, for the last time. His eyes were still looking eagerly over the right-hand side of the bed when the final flash of light came, but they discerned nothing. The fair woman with the knife was gone.

The conviction that he was alone again, weakened the hold of the terror that had struck him dumb up to this time. The preternatural sharpness which the very intensity of his panic had mysteriously imparted to his faculties, left them suddenly.

His brain grew confused—his heart beat wildly—his ears opened for the first time since the appearance of the woman, to a sense of the woful, ceaseless moaning of the wind among the trees. With the dreadful conviction of the reality of what he had seen still strong within him, he leapt out of bed, and screaming—"Murder!—Wake up there, wake up!"—dashed headlong through the darkness to the door.

It was fast locked, exactly as he had left it on going to bed.

His cries, on starting up, had alarmed the house. He heard the terrified, confused exclamations of women; he saw the master of the house approaching along the passage, with his burning rush-candle in one hand and his gun in the other.

"What is it?" asked the landlord, breathlessly.

Isaac could only answer in a whisper. "A woman, with a knife in her hand," he gasped out. "In my room—a fair, yellow-haired woman; she jobbed at me with the knife, twice over."

The landlord's pale cheeks grew paler. He looked at Isaac eagerly by the flickering light of his candle; and his face began to get red again—his voice altered, too, as well as his complexion.

"She seems to have missed you twice," he said.

"I dodged the knife as it came down," Isaac went on, in the same scared whisper. "It struck the bed each time."

The landlord took his candle into the bedroom immediately. In less than a minute he came out again into the passage in a violent passion.

"The devil fly away with you and

your woman with the knife! There isn't a mark in the bed-clothes anywhere. What do you mean by coming into a man's place and frightening his family out of their wits about a dream?"

"I'll leave your house," said Isaac, faintly. "Better out on the road, in rain and dark, on my road home, than back again in that room, after what I've seen in it. Lend me a light to get my clothes by, and tell me what I'm to pay."

"Pay!" cried the landlord, leading the way with his light sulkily into the bed-room. "You'll find your score on the slate when you go down stairs. I wouldn't have taken you in for all the money you've got about you, if I'd known your dreaming, screeching ways beforehand. Look at the bed. Where's the cut of a knife in it? Look at the window—is the lock bursted?

Look at the door (which I heard you fasten yourself)—is it broke in? A murdering woman with a knife in my house! You ought to be ashamed of yourself!"

Isaac answered not a word. He huddled on his clothes; and then they went down stairs together.

"Nigh on twenty minutes past two!" said the landlord, as they passed the clock. "A nice time in the morning to frighten honest people out of their wits!"

Isaac paid his bill, and the landlord let him out at the front door, asking, with a grin of contempt, as he undid the strong fastenings, whether "the murdering woman got in that way?"

They parted without a word on either side. The rain had ceased; but the night was dark, and the wind bleaker than ever.

Little did the darkness, or the cold, or the uncertainty about the way home, matter to Isaac. If he had been turned out into a wilderness in a thunderstorm, it would have been a relief, after what he had suffered in the bedroom of the inn.

What was the fair woman with the knife? The creature of a dream, or that other creature from the unknown world called among men by the name of ghost? He could make nothing of the mystery—had made nothing of it, even when it was mid-day on Wednesday, and when he stood, at last, after many times missing his road, once more on the door-step of home.

CHAPTER III.

His mother came out eagerly to receive him. His face told her in a moment that something was wrong.

"I've lost the place; but that's my luck. I dreamed an ill dream last night, mother—or, maybe, I saw a ghost. Take it either way, it scared me out of my senses, and I'm not my own man again yet."

"Isaac! your face frightens me. Come in to the fire. Come in, and tell mother all about it."

He was as anxious to tell as she was to hear; for it had been his hope, all the way home, that his mother, with her quicker capacity and superior knowledge, might be able to throw some light on the mystery which he could not clear up for himself. His memory of the dream was still mechanically vivid, though his thoughts were entirely confused by it.

His mother's face grew paler and paler as he went on. She never interrupted him by so much as a single word; but when he had done, she moved her chair close to his, put her arm round his neck, and said to him:—

"Isaac, you dreamed your ill dream on this Wednesday morning. What time was it when you saw the fair woman with the knife in her hand?"

Isaac reflected on what the landlord had said when they had passed by the clock on his leaving the inn—allowed as nearly as he could for the time that must have elapsed between the unlocking of his bedroom door and the paying of his bill just before going away, and answered: —

"Somewhere about two o'clock in the morning."

His mother suddenly quitted her hold of his neck, and struck her hands together with a gesture of despair.

"This Wednesday is your birthday, Isaac; and two o'clock in the morning was the time when you were born!"

Isaac's capacities were not quick enough to catch the infection of his mother's superstitious dread. He was amazed, and a little startled also, when she suddenly rose from her chair, opened her old

writing-desk, took pen, ink, and paper, and then said to him :—

"Your memory is but a poor one, Isaac, and now I'm an old woman, mine's not much better. I want all about this dream of yours to be as well known to both of us, years hence, as it is now. Tell me over again all you told me a minute ago, when you spoke of what the woman with the knife looked like."

Isaac obeyed, and marvelled much as he saw his mother carefully set down on paper the very words that he was saying.

"Light grey eyes," she wrote as they came to the descriptive part, "with a droop in the left eyelid. Flaxen hair, with a gold-yellow streak in it. White arms, with a down upon them. Little lady's hand, with a reddish look about the finger-nails. Clasp-knife with a buck-

horn handle, that seemed as good as new." To these particulars, Mrs. Scatchard added the year, month, day of the week, and time in the morning, when the woman of the dream appeared to her son. She then locked up the paper carefully in her writing-desk.

Neither on that day, nor on any day after, could her son induce her to return to the matter of the dream. She obstinately kept her thoughts about it to herself, and even refused to refer again to the paper in her writing-desk. Ere long, Isaac grew weary of attempting to make her break her resolute silence; and time, which sooner or later wears out all things, gradually wore out the impression produced on him by the dream. He began by thinking of it carelessly, and he ended by not thinking of it at all.

This result was the more easily brought about by the advent of some important changes for the better in his prospects, which commenced not long after his terrible night's experience at the inn. He reaped at last the reward of his long and patient suffering under adversity, by getting an excellent place, keeping it for seven years, and leaving it, on the death of his master, not only with an excellent character, but also with a comfortable annuity bequeathed to him as a reward for saving his mistress's life in a carriage accident. Thus it happened that Isaac Scatchard returned to his old mother, seven years after the time of the dream at the inn, with an annual sum of money at his disposal, sufficient to keep them both in ease and independence for the rest of their lives.

The mother, whose health had been bad of late years, profited so much by the care bestowed on her and by freedom from money anxieties, that when Isaac's birthday came round, she was able to sit up comfortably at table and dine with him.

On that day, as the evening drew on, Mrs. Scatchard discovered that a bottle of tonic medicine—which she was accustomed to take, and in which she had fancied that a dose or more was still left—happened to be empty. Isaac immediately volunteered to go to the chemist's, and get it filled again. It was as rainy and bleak an autumn night as on the memorable past occasion when he lost his way and slept at the roadside inn.

On going into the chemist's shop, he was passed hurriedly by a poorly-dressed

woman coming out of it. The glimpse he had of her face struck him, and he looked back after her as she descended the door-steps.

"You're noticing that woman?" said the chemist's apprentice behind the counter. "It's my opinion there's something wrong with her. She's been asking for laudanum to put to a bad tooth. Master's out for half an hour; and I told her I wasn't allowed to sell poison to strangers in his absence. She laughed in a queer way, and said she would come back in half an hour. If she expects master to serve her, I think she'll be disappointed. It's a case of suicide, sir, if ever there was one yet."

These words added immeasurably to the sudden interest in the woman which Isaac had felt at the first sight of her face.

After he had got the medicine bottle filled, he looked about anxiously for her, as soon as he was out in the street. She was walking slowly up and down on the opposite side of the road. With his heart, very much to his own surprise, beating fast, Isaac crossed over and spoke to her.

He asked if she was in any distress. She pointed to her torn shawl, her scanty dress, her crushed, dirty bonnet—then moved under a lamp so as to let the light fall on her stern, pale, but still most beautiful face.

"I look like a comfortable, happy woman—don't I?" she said with a bitter laugh.

She spoke with a purity of intonation which Isaac had never heard before from other than ladies' lips. Her slightest

actions seemed to have the easy negligent grace of a thorough-bred woman. Her skin, for all its poverty-stricken paleness, was as delicate as if her life had been passed in the enjoyment of every social comfort that wealth can purchase. Even her small, finely-shaped hands, gloveless as they were, had not lost their whiteness.

Little by little, in answer to his questions, the sad story of the woman came out. There is no need to relate it here; it is told over and over again in Police reports and paragraphs about Attempted Suicides.

"My name is Rebecca Murdoch," said the woman, as she ended. "I have ninepence left, and I thought of spending it at the chemist's over the way in securing a passage to the other world. Whatever

it is, it can't be worse to me than this —so why should I stop here?"

Besides the natural compassion and sadness moved in his heart by what he heard, Isaac felt within him some mysterious influence at work all the time the woman was speaking, which utterly confused his ideas and almost deprived him of his powers of speech. All that he could say in answer to her last reckless words was, that he would prevent her from attempting her own life, if he followed her about all night to do it. His rough, trembling earnestness seemed to impress her.

"I won't occasion you that trouble," she answered, when he repeated his threat. "You have given me a fancy for living by speaking kindly to me. No need for the mockery of protestations and promises. You may believe me without them. Come

to Fuller's Meadow to-morrow at twelve, and you will find me alive, to answer for myself—No !—no money. My ninepence will do to get me as good a night's lodging as I want."

She nodded and left him. He made no attempt to follow—he felt no suspicion that she was deceiving him.

"It's strange, but I can't help believing her," he said to himself—and walked away bewildered, towards home.

On entering the house his mind was still so completely absorbed by its new subject of interest, that he took no notice of what his mother was doing when he came in with the bottle of medicine. She had opened her old writing-desk in his absence, and was now reading a paper attentively that lay inside it. On every birthday of Isaac's since she had written down the particulars of his

dream from his own lips, she had been accustomed to read that same paper, and ponder over it in private.

The next day he went to Fuller's Meadow.

He had done only right in believing her so implicitly—she was there, punctual to a minute, to answer for herself. The last-left faint defences in Isaac's heart, against the fascination which a word or look from her began inscrutably to exercise over him, sank down and vanished before her for ever on that memorable morning.

When a man previously insensible to the influence of women, forms an attachment in middle life, the instances are rare indeed, let the warning circumstances be what they may, in which he is found capable of freeing himself from the tyranny of the new ruling passion. The charm of being spoken to familiarly, fondly, and gratefully by a woman

whose language and manners still retained enough of their early refinement to hint at the high social station that she had lost, would have been a dangerous luxury to a man of Isaac's rank at the age of twenty. But it was far more than that—it was certain ruin to him—now that his heart was opening unworthily to a new influence at that middle time of life when strong feelings of all kinds, once implanted, strike root most stubbornly in a man's moral nature. A few more stolen interviews after that first morning in Fuller's Meadow completed his infatuation. In less than a month from the time when he first met her, Isaac Scatchard had consented to give Rebecca Murdoch a new interest in existence, and a chance of recovering the character she had lost, by promising to make her his wife.

She had taken possession not of his passions only, but of his faculties as well. All the mind he had he put into her keeping. She directed him on every point; even instructing him how to break the news of his approaching marriage in the safest manner to his mother.

"If you tell her how you met me and who I am at first," said the cunning woman, "she will move heaven and earth to prevent our marriage. Say I am the sister of one of your fellow-servants—ask her to see me before you go into any more particulars—and leave it to me to do the rest. I mean to make her love me next best to you Isaac, before she knows anything of who I really am."

The motive of the deceit was sufficient to sanctify it to Isaac. The stratagem proposed relieved him of his one great

anxiety, and quieted his uneasy conscience on the subject of his mother. Still, there was something wanting to perfect his happiness, something that he could not realise, something mysteriously untraceable, and yet something that perpetually made itself felt; not when he was absent from Rebecca Murdoch, but, strange to say, when he was actually in her presence! She was kindness itself with him; she never made him feel his inferior capacities, and inferior manners—she showed the sweetest anxiety to please him in the smallest trifles; but, in spite of all these attractions, he never could feel quite at his ease with her. At their first meeting, there had mingled with his admiration when he looked in her face, a faint involuntary feeling of doubt whether that face was entirely strange to him. No after-familiarity had

the slightest effect on this inexplicable, wearisome uncertainty.

Concealing the truth as he had been directed, he announced his marriage engagement precipitately and confusedly to his mother, on the day when he contracted it. Poor Mrs. Scatchard showed her perfect confidence in her son by flinging her arms round his neck, and giving him joy of having found at last, in the sister of one of his fellow-servants, a woman to comfort and care for him after his mother was gone. She was all eagerness to see the woman of her son's choice; and the next day was fixed for the introduction.

It was a bright sunny morning, and the little cottage parlour was full of light, as Mrs. Scatchard, happy and expectant, dressed for the occasion in her Sunday

gown, sat waiting for her son and her future daughter-in-law.

Punctual to the appointed time, Isaac hurriedly and nervously led his promised wife into the room. His mother rose to receive her—advanced a few steps, smiling—looked Rebecca full in the eyes—and suddenly stopped. Her face, which had been flushed the moment before, turned white in an instant—her eyes lost their expression of softness and kindness, and assumed a blank look of terror—her outstretched hands fell to her sides, and she staggered back a few steps with a low cry to her son.

"Isaac!" she whispered, clutching him fast by the arm, when he asked alarmedly if she was taken ill. "Isaac! does that woman's face remind you of nothing?"

Before he could answer, before he could

look round to where Rebecca stood, astonished and angered by her reception, at the lower end of the room, his mother pointed impatiently to her writing-desk, and gave him the key.

"Open it," she said, in a quick, breathless whisper.

"What does this mean? Why am I treated as if I had no business here? Does your mother want to insult me?" asked Rebecca, angrily.

"Open it, and give me the paper in the left-hand drawer. Quick! quick, for Heaven's sake!" said Mrs. Scatchard, shrinking further back in terror.

Isaac gave her the paper. She looked it over eagerly for a moment—then followed Rebecca, who was now turning away haughtily to leave the room, and caught her by the shoulder—abruptly raised the long, loose

sleeve of her gown—and glanced at her hand and arm. Something like fear began to steal over the angry expression of Rebecca's face as she shook herself free from the old woman's grasp. "Mad!" she said to herself; "and Isaac never told me." With these few words she left the room.

Isaac was hastening after her, when his mother turned and stopped his further progress. It wrung his heart to see the misery and terror in her face as she looked at him.

"Light grey eyes," she said, in low, mournful, awe-struck tones, pointing towards the open door. "A droop in the left eyelid. Flaxen hair with a gold-yellow streak in it. White arms with a down on them. Little, lady's hand, with a reddish look under the finger-nails. *The Dream-Woman!*—Isaac, the Dream-Woman!"

That faint cleaving doubt which he had never been able to shake off in Rebecca Murdoch's presence, was fatally set at rest for ever. He *had* seen her face, then, before—seven years before, on his birthday, in the bedroom of the lonely inn.

"Be warned! Oh, my son, be warned! Isaac! Isaac! let her go, and do you stop with me!"

Something darkened the parlour window as those words were said. A sudden chill ran through him; and he glanced sidelong at the shadow. Rebecca Murdoch had come back. She was peering in curiously at them over the low window blind.

"I have promised to marry, mother," he said, "and marry I must."

The tears came into his eyes as he spoke, and dimmed his sight; but he could

just discern the fatal face outside moving away again from the window.

His mother's head sank lower.

"Are you faint?" he whispered.

"Broken-hearted, Isaac."

He stooped down and kissed her. The shadow, as he did so, returned to the window; and the fatal face peered in curiously once more.

CHAPTER IV.

THREE weeks after that day, Isaac and Rebecca were man and wife. All that was hopelessly dogged and stubborn in the man's moral nature seemed to have closed round his fatal passion, and to have fixed it unassailably in his heart.

After that first interview in the cottage parlour, no consideration would induce Mrs. Scatchard to see her son's wife again, or even to talk of her when Isaac tried hard to plead her cause after their marriage.

This course of conduct was not in any

degree occasioned by a discovery of the degradation in which Rebecca had lived. There was no question of that between mother and son. There was no question of anything but the fearfully exact resemblance between the living, breathing woman, and the spectre-woman of Isaac's dream.

Rebecca, on her side, neither felt nor expressed the slightest sorrow at the estrangement between herself and her mother-in-law. Isaac, for the sake of peace, had never contradicted her first idea that age and long illness had affected Mrs. Scatchard's mind. He even allowed his wife to upbraid him for not having confessed this to her at the time of their marriage engagement, rather than risk anything by hinting at the truth. The sacrifice of his integrity before his one all-mastering delu-

sion, seemed but a small thing, and cost his conscience but little, after the sacrifices he had already made.

The time of waking from his delusion —the cruel and the rueful time—was not far off. After some quiet months of married life, as the summer was ending, and the year was getting on towards the month of his birth-day, Isaac found his wife altering towards him. She grew sullen and contemptuous—she formed acquaintances of the most dangerous kind, in defiance of his objections, his entreaties, and his commands—and, worst of all, she learnt, ere long, after every fresh difference with her husband, to seek the deadly self-oblivion of drink. Little by little, after the first miserable discovery that his wife was keeping company with drunkards, the shocking certainty forced

itself on Isaac that she had grown to be a drunkard herself.

He had been in a sadly desponding state for some time before the occurrence of these domestic calamities. His mother's health, as he could but too plainly discern every time he went to see her at the cottage, was failing fast; and he upbraided himself in secret as the cause of the bodily and mental suffering she endured. When, to his remorse on his mother's account, was added the shame and misery occasioned by the discovery of his wife's degradation, he sank under the double trial —his face began to alter fast, and he looked, what he was, a spirit-broken man.

His mother, still struggling bravely against the illness that was hurrying her to the grave, was the first to notice the sad alteration in him, and the first to hear

of his last, worst trouble with his wife. She could only weep bitterly, on the day when he made his humiliating confession; but on the next occasion when he went to see her, she had taken a resolution, in reference to his domestic afflictions, which astonished, and even alarmed him. He found her dressed to go out, and on asking the reason, received this answer:—

"I am not long for this world, Isaac," she said; "and I shall not feel easy on my death-bed, unless I have done my best to the last to make my son happy. I mean to put my own fears and my own feelings out of the question, and to go with you to your wife, and try what I can do to reclaim her. Give me your arm, Isaac; and let me do the last thing I can in this world to help my son before it is too late."

He could not disobey her: and they walked together slowly towards his miserable home.

It was only one o'clock in the afternoon when they reached the cottage where he lived. It was their dinner hour, and Rebecca was in the kitchen. He was thus able to take his mother quietly into the parlour, and then prepare his wife for the interview. She had fortunately drank but little at that early hour, and she was less sullen and capricious than usual.

He returned to his mother, with his mind tolerably at ease. His wife soon followed him into the parlour, and the meeting between her and Mrs. Scatchard passed off better than he had ventured to anticipate: though he observed with secret apprehension that his mother, resolutely as she controlled herself in other

respects, could not look his wife in the face when she spoke to her. It was a relief to him, therefore, when Rebecca began to lay the cloth.

She laid the cloth — brought in the bread-tray, and cut a slice from the loaf for her husband—then returned to the kitchen. At that moment, Isaac, still anxiously watching his mother, was startled by seeing the same ghastly change pass over her face, which had altered it so awfully on the morning when Rebecca and she first met. Before he could say a word, she whispered with a look of horror:—

"Take me back! —home, home again, Isaac! Come with me, and never go back again."

He was afraid to ask for an explanation,—he could only sign to her to be silent, and help her quickly to the door. As

they passed the bread-tray on the table, she stopped and pointed to it.

"Did you see what your wife cut your bread with?" she asked, in a low whisper.

"No, mother—I was not noticing—what was it?"

"Look!"

He did look. A new clasp-knife, with a buckhorn handle, lay with the loaf in the bread-tray. He stretched out his hand, shudderingly, to possess himself of it; but, at the same time, there was a noise in the kitchen, and his mother caught at his arm.

"The knife of the dream!—Isaac, I'm faint with fear—take me away, before she comes back!"

He was hardly able to support her—the visible, tangible reality of the knife

struck him with a panic, and utterly destroyed any faint doubts that he might have entertained up to this time, in relation to the mysterious dream-warning of nearly eight years before. By a last desperate effort, he summoned self-possession enough to help his mother out of the house—so quietly, that the "dream-woman" (he thought of her by that name now!) did not hear them departing from the kitchen.

"Don't go back, Isaac, — don't go back!" implored Mrs. Scatchard, as he turned to go away, after seeing her safely seated again in her own room.

"I must get the knife," he answered under his breath. His mother tried to stop him again; but he hurried out without another word.

On his return, he found that his wife

had discovered their secret departure from the house. She had been drinking, and was in a fury of passion. The dinner in the kitchen was flung under the grate; the cloth was off the parlour-table. Where was the knife?

Unwisely, he asked for it. She was only too glad of the opportunity of irritating him, which the request afforded her. "He wanted the knife, did he? Could he give her a reason why?—No!—Then he should not have it,—not if he went down on his knees to ask for it." Further recriminations elicited the fact that she had bought it a bargain—and that she considered it her own especial property. Isaac saw the uselessness of attempting to get the knife by fair means, and determined to search for it, later in the day, in secret. The search was unsuccessful. Night came

on, and he left the house to walk about the streets. He was afraid now to sleep in the same room with her.

Three weeks passed. Still sullenly enraged with him, she would not give up the knife; and still that fear of sleeping in the same room with her possessed him. He walked about at night, or dozed in the parlour, or sat watching by his mother's bed-side. Before the expiration of the first week in the new month his mother died. It wanted then but ten days of her son's birthday. She had longed to live till that anniversary. Isaac was present at her death; and her last words in this world were addressed to him:—

"Don't go back, my son—don't go back!"

He was obliged to go back, if it were only to watch his wife. Exasperated to

the last degree by his distrust of her, she had revengefully sought to add a sting to his grief, during the last days of his mother's illness, by declaring that she would assert her right to attend the funeral. In spite of all that he could do or say, she held with wicked pertinacity to her word; and, on the day appointed for the burial, forced herself—inflamed and shameless with drink—into her husband's presence, and declared that she would walk in the funeral procession to his mother's grave.

This last worst outrage, accompanied by all that was most insulting in word and look, maddened him for the moment. He struck her.

The instant the blow was dealt, he repented it. She crouched down, silent, in a corner of the room, and eyed him

steadily; it was a look that cooled his hot blood. and made him tremble. But there was no time now to think of a means of making atonement. Nothing remained, but to risk the worst till the funeral was over. There was but one way of making sure of her. He locked her into her bedroom.

When he came back some hours after, he found her sitting, very much altered in look and bearing, by the bed-side, with a bundle on her lap. She rose, and faced him quietly, and spoke with a strange stillness in her voice, a strange repose in her eyes, a strange composure in her manner.

"No man has ever struck me twice," she said; "and my husband shall have no second opportunity. Set the door open and let me go. From this day forth we see each other no more."

Before he could answer she passed him, and left the room. He saw her walk away up the street.

Would she return?

All that night he watched and waited; but no footstep came near the house. The next night, overpowered by fatigue, he lay down in bed in his clothes, with the door locked, the key on the table, and the candle burning. His slumber was not disturbed. The third night, the fourth, the fifth, the sixth passed, and nothing happened. He lay down on the seventh, still in his clothes, still with the door locked, the key on the table, and the candle burning; but easier in his mind.

Easier in his mind, and in perfect health of body, when he fell off to sleep. But his rest was disturbed. He woke twice,

without any sensation of uneasiness. But the third time it was that never-to-be-forgotten shivering of the night at the lonely inn, that dreadful sinking pain at the heart, which once more aroused him in an instant.

His eyes opened towards the left hand side of the bed, and there stood—

The Dream-Woman again? No! His wife; the living reality. with the dream-spectre's face—in the dream-spectre's attitude; the fair arm up—the knife clasped in the delicate white hand.

He sprang upon her, almost at the instant of seeing her, and yet not quickly enough to prevent her from hiding the knife. Without a word from him, —without a cry from her—he pinioned her in a chair. With one hand he felt up her sleeve—and there, where the dream-

woman had hidden the knife, his wife had hidden it—the knife with the buck-horn handle, that looked like new.

In the despair of that fearful moment his brain was steady, his heart was calm. He looked at her fixedly, with the knife in his hand, and said these last words:—

"You told me we should see each other no more, and you have come back. It is my turn, now, to go, and to go for ever. *I* say that we shall see each other no more; and *my* word shall not be broken."

He left her, and set forth into the night. There was a bleak wind abroad, and the smell of recent rain was in the air. The distant church clocks chimed the quarter as he walked rapidly beyond the last houses in the suburb. He asked the first policeman he met what hour that was, of which the quarter past had just struck.

The man referred sleepily to his watch, and answered, "Two o'clock." Two in the morning. What day of the month was this day that had just begun? He reckoned it up from the date of his mother's funeral. The fatal parallel was complete—it was his birthday!

Had he escaped the mortal peril which his dream foretold? or had he only received a second warning?

As that ominous doubt forced itself on his mind, he stopped, reflected, and turned back again towards the city. He was still resolute to hold to his word, and never to let her see him more; but there was a thought now in his mind of having her watched and followed. The knife was in his possession; the world was before him; but a new distrust of her—a vague, unspeakable, superstitious dread—had overcome him.

"I must know where she goes, now she thinks I have left her," he said to himself as he stole back wearily to the precincts of his house.

It was still dark. He had left the candle burning in the bedchamber; but when he looked up to the window of the room now, there was no light in it. He crept cautiously to the house-door. On going away, he remembered to have closed it; on trying it now, he found it open.

He waited outside, never losing sight of the house, till daylight. Then he ventured indoors—listened, and heard nothing—looked into kitchen, scullery, parlour; and found nothing: went up, at last, into the bedroom—it was empty. A pick-lock lay on the floor, betraying how she had gained entrance in the night; and that was the only trace of her.

Whither had she gone? That no mortal tongue could tell him. The darkness had covered her flight; and when the day broke no man could say where the light found her.

Before leaving the house and the town for ever, he gave instructions to a friend and neighbour to sell his furniture for anything that it would fetch, and apply the proceeds to employing the police to trace her. The directions were honestly followed, and the money was all spent; but the inquiries led to nothing. The pick-lock on the bed-room floor remained the one last useless trace of the Dream-Woman.

* * * * *

At this point of the narrative the landlord paused, and, turning towards the window of the room in which we were sitting, looked in the direction of the stable-yard.

"So far," he said, "I tell you what was

told to me. The little that remains to be added lies within my own experience. Between two and three months after the events I have just been relating, Isaac Scatchard came to me, withered and old-looking before his time, just as you saw him to-day. He had his testimonials to character with him, and he asked for employment here. Knowing that my wife and he were distantly related, I gave him a trial, in consideration of that relationship, and liked him in spite of his queer habits. He is as sober, honest, and willing a man as there is in England. As for his restlessness at night, and his sleeping away his leisure time in the day, who can wonder at it after hearing his story? Besides, he never objects to being roused up, when he's wanted, so there's not much inconvenience to complain of, after all."

"I suppose he is afraid of a return of that dreadful dream, and of waking out of it in the dark?" said I.

"No," returned the landlord. "The dream comes back to him so often, that he has got to bear with it by this time resignedly enough. It's his wife keeps him waking at night, as he has often told me."

"What! Has she never been heard of yet?"

"Never. Isaac himself has the one perpetual thought about her, that she is alive and looking for him. I believe he wouldn't let himself drop off to sleep towards two in the morning, for a king's ransom. Two in the morning, he says, is the time she will find him, one of these days. Two in the morning is the time all the year round, when he likes to be

most certain that he has got that clasp-knife safe about him. He does not mind being alone, as long as he is awake, except on the night before his birthday, when he firmly believes himself to be in peril of his life. The birthday has only come round once since he has been here; and then he sat up, along with the night-porter. 'She's looking for me,' is all he says, when anybody speaks to him about the one anxiety of his life; 'she's looking for me.' He may be right. She *may* be looking for him. Who can tell?"

"Who can tell?" said I.

THE FOURTH DAY.

THE sky once more cloudy and threatening. No news of George. I corrected Morgan's second story to-day; numbered it Seven; and added it to our stock.

Undeterred by the weather, Miss Jessie set off this morning on the longest ride she had yet undertaken. She had heard—through one of my brother's labourers, I believe—of the actual existence, in this nineteenth century, of no less a personage than a Welsh Bard, who was to be

found at a distant farm-house, far beyond the limits of Owen's property. The prospect of discovering this remarkable relic of past times hurried her off, under the guidance of her ragged groom, in a high state of excitement, to see and hear the venerable man. She was away the whole day, and for the first time since her visit, she kept us waiting more than half an hour for dinner. The moment we all sat down to table, she informed us, to Morgan's great delight, that the bard was a rank Impostor.

"Why, what did you expect to see?" I asked.

"A Welsh Patriarch, to be sure, with a long white beard, flowing robes, and a harp to match," answered Miss Jessie.

"And what did you find?"

"A highly-respectable middle-aged rustic;

a smiling, smoothly-shaven, obliging man, dressed in a blue swallow-tailed coat, with brass buttons, and exhibiting his bardic legs in a pair of extremely stout and comfortable corduroy trousers."

"But he sang old Welsh songs, surely?"

"Sang!—I'll tell you what he did. He sat down on a Windsor chair, without a harp, he put his hands in his pockets, cleared his throat, looked up at the ceiling, and suddenly burst into a series of the shrillest falsetto screeches I ever heard in my life. My own private opinion is that he was suffering from hydrophobia. I have lost all belief, henceforth and for ever, in Bards—all belief in everything, in short, except your very delightful stories and this remarkably good dinner."

Ending with that smart double fire of compliments to her hosts, the Queen of Hearts

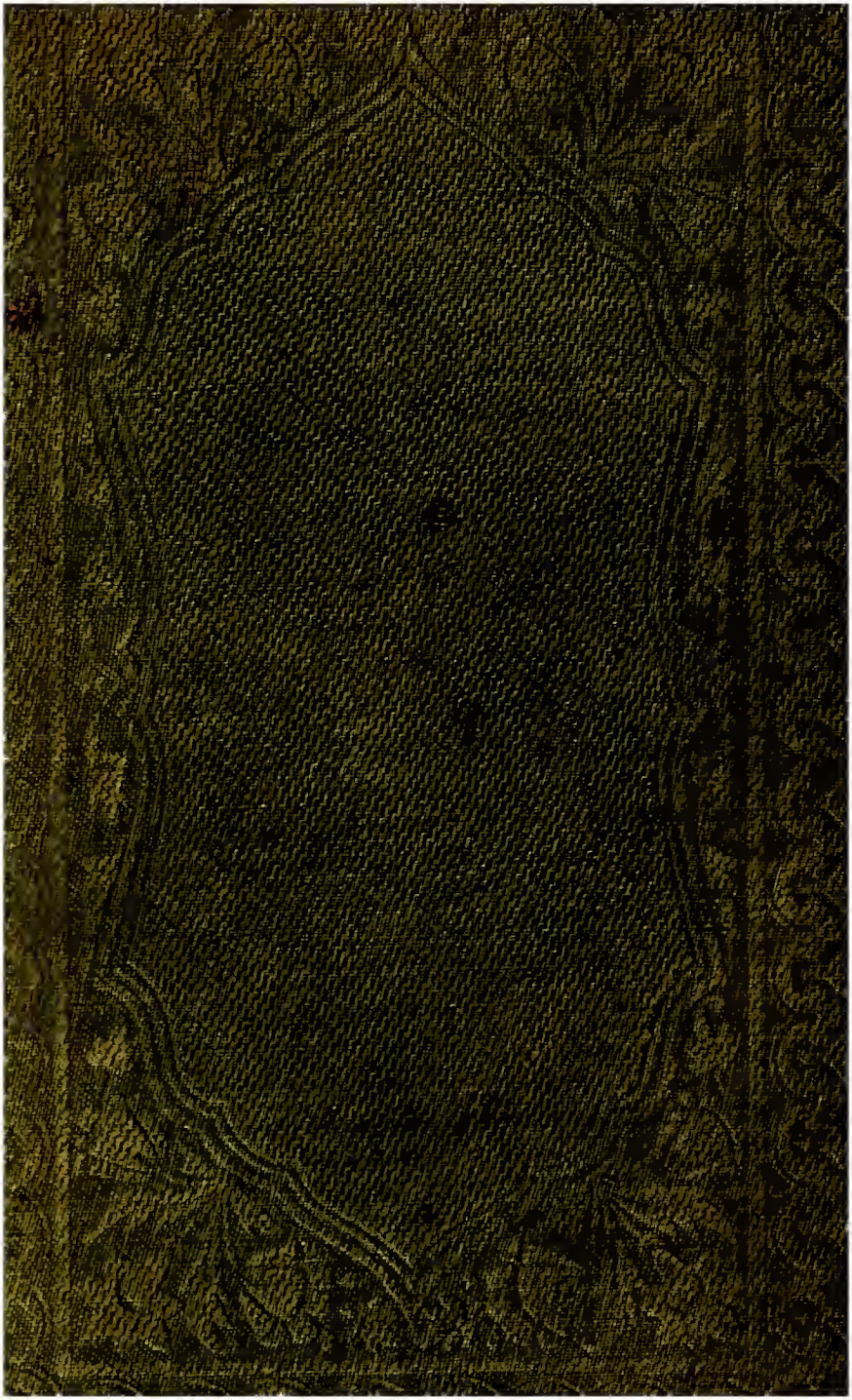
honoured us all three with a smile of approval, and transferred her attention to her knife and fork.

The number drawn to-night was One. On examination of the Purple Volume, it proved to be my turn to read again.

"Our story to-night," I said, "contains the narrative of a very remarkable adventure which really befell me when I was a young man. At the time of my life when these events happened, I was dabbling in literature when I ought to have been studying law, and travelling on the Continent when I ought to have been keeping my terms at Lincoln's Inn. At the outset of the story, you will find that I refer to the county in which I lived in my youth, and to a neighbouring family possessing a large estate in it. That county is situated in a part of England

far away from the Glen Tower; and that family is therefore not to be associated with any present or former neighbours of ours in this part of the world."

After saying these necessary words of explanation, I opened the first page, and began the Story of my Own Adventure. I observed that my audience started a little as I read the title; which I must add, in my own defence, had been almost forced on my choice by the peculiar character of the narrative. It was, "MAD MONKTON."

END OF VOL. I.

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